

NEBULA

MONTHLY.

2/-

SCIENCE FICTION

NUMBER 34



FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

LIGHT AND DARKNESS



Dark Nebulosity South of Orion (Photo: Science Museum, London. Reproduced by permission of Mount Wilson Observatory, California)

KENNETH JOHNS

A million stars make up only a fraction of our Galaxy, a million years but a heart beat of its life, and yet in all this star-spangled magnificence of the Milky Way we can plainly see gaping areas of blackness where there shines no solitary star, glimmers no speck of light.

The construction of the Milky Way is far from homogeneous; even small telescopes show these schisms of blackness, awesome in their total blankness, giving the chilling feeling that the darkness of intergalactic space is encroaching on our island of stars.

This month's photograph shows one such volume of blackness—the famous Horsehead Nebula, often described as the dark nebulosity South of Orion. Its zoomorphological description fits it well as it stands out against

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by **PETER HAMILTON**

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Black and White Illustrations by Arthur Thomson, John Greengrass and Kenneth Barr

NEBULA Science-Fiction is published monthly by **PETER HAMILTON**, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E., Scotland. This edition is dated September, 1958.
Editorial Address: 1, Kylepark Crescent, Uddingston, Glasgow.

Subscription rates in Great Britain and the British Commonwealth: 12 issues, 24/- stg.; in the U.S.A. and Canada, 12 issues, \$4.00. All rates post free. Sole distribution rights for Australia and New Zealand have been granted to Messrs. Gordon & Gotch (Australasia), Ltd.

Application for second-class mail privileges is pending at New York, N.Y.

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Made and printed by **Cahill & Co. Ltd.** in the Republic of Ireland at **Parkgate Printing Works, Kingsbridge, Dublin.**

Look here

Within the last few days (as I write) three developments have taken place in the scientific world which, if they had occurred even as recently as one year ago, would have caused unparalleled sensationalism and excitement.

Firstly came the news that the American atomic submarine *Nautilus* had emerged in the Atlantic Ocean after passing 1,830 miles beneath the North Polar ice cap. In the best tradition of Jules Verne, Commander Anderson and his crew have opened up a valuable new undersea route for fleets of cargo-carrying submarines and, in doing so, have fired the imagination not only of the science-fictionists, but also of those who, devoid of any kind of pioneering spirit, can apparently see no point in scientific progress unless it is accompanied by an immediate cash return. Quite an achievement, even for an atomic submarine.

Then, only a week later, came the Earth's first rocket to the Moon, a thrill hardly marred at all by its early and catastrophic failure. General Schriever, in charge of the American Air Force Lunar Project, has been quoted as saying that he was disappointed but not discouraged, and that another attempt would be likely to take place soon. This is the type of attitude which can really make our fast-stagnating civilisation go places—the Moon and planets among them.

Finally, and perhaps most surprising of all, there was the proposal by Great Britain and the U.S.A. that all nuclear tests should be suspended for one year from October 31st, 1958.

All these developments took place within a period of less than a fortnight and, in light of their obvious consequences, I feel there are two very important questions which we must now ask ourselves: Is science-fact now actually catching up on science-fiction, as many self-styled experts would have us believe? And is the millennium of scientific progress, which has so often been the subject of science-fiction stories, at last almost at hand?

The answer to the first of these questions is a simple and very definite negative. No scientific progress likely to be made in the next hundred years—even at the present startling rate—is likely to result in the formation of a Terran Interstellar Empire and it is only with a complete realisation of this fact that we can see how very far in advance of fact is our favourite type of literature. However, even in the very distant future, with mankind advancing triumphantly across the Galaxy, there will still be (as there has always been) a demand amongst intelligent and forward-looking people for speculative and philosophical literature as exemplified by the better type of science-fiction today.

It seems likely to me that man will only cease to be interested in imaginative writing when he ceases to be interested in the future itself and finally calls a halt to all progress. Scientific achievement of any kind, from the first airplane to the first spaceship to Alpha Centauri and beyond, merely opens the door to further speculation and it is to this fact that science-fiction owes its existence and from it that it will continue to derive its sustenance.

In answer to the second question, I can only say that I very much hope so. The world's leaders have the overwhelming responsibility—perhaps the greatest in history ever to be borne by so small a group of men—of guiding their nations either into a nuclear holocaust with its inevitable consequences of planetary suicide, or towards peace and continued scientific progress.

One road will lead us to barbarity or, more probably, complete racial extermination. The other, in the fullness of time, to a never-ending freedom from want on Earth and an option on the depths of space.

Peter Hamilton.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

Fourth Factor

She had stumbled upon a culture, stranger than her wildest imaginings. Could there be any hope of integration for these people?

Illustrations by Arthur Thomson

The stallion moved slowly, as if aware he was nearing the end of his journey. Behind him lay the foothills of the mountains, behind him the sage, the shaggy wild lupin trees, the fetlock-high grasses. Now the ground was tame and planted. He walked beside a barley field; geese ambled reluctantly out of his path. The girl on his back was limp, one down-trailing arm swinging with his every movement.

She lay awkwardly across the jolting saddle, eyes half-shut, drinking in details of the settlement. Her horse carried her among the buildings now. They were all single-storied, with at least two sides of them built entirely of glass; none of them had gardens; what sort of people could so dislike privacy?

A number of cows wandered among the buildings and along the tracks. No doubt it was thanks to them she managed to get so far into the settlement without being noticed. Then a dark,

authoritative man loomed before her, making soothing noises to her mount. She caught sight of a hand stormed with wiry black hair seizing the rein, and gently closed her eyes.

The stallion stopped and began to crop grass.

"Doctor Eileen!" the dark man called. "Come and take a look here, will you?"

Footsteps approaching, light but definite.

"Anything to record, Doctor Saul?" asked an efficient female voice.

"There's a stranger here," the dark man addressed as Doctor Saul said. "Looks like she needs aid. Better help me get her off the horse."

"We can take her into Gavin's place," the woman assented. "I've got her legs."

By now, other people had collected, watching or helping as the limp body was lowered from the saddle and carried into the nearby building which Doctor Eileen had designated as "Gavin's place". Inside, the girl was placed gently on a low couch.

"I hope you don't mind a strange girl on your bed, Gavin," Doctor Eileen said. "Perhaps you'd better give me your reactions to the situation."

The voice that answered her was a young man's, hesitant yet eager.

"I don't mind, Doctor Eileen. I'm glad if it helps her—if she's in trouble, I mean. Apart from her hair being a bit mussed, she's very pretty. Attractive, you know. She's welcome to the bed."

"Couldn't you phrase your feelings more accurately than that?" Doctor Eileen asked, a hint of frost in her tone. She sounded as if she had a pencil poised above a notebook: a sharp pencil.

"Oh. Sorry," Gavin said, pulling himself together. "What I meant to say was that, uh, my natural urge to be of assistance to anyone in trouble—I suppose she's got some sort of neurotic swoon on, huh?—is, uh, reinforced by the stimulus of her physical good looks."

"Better," Doctor Eileen approved. "In short, your altruism is mixed with sexual desire."

"I didn't say that! Did I, Doctor Saul?"

"Your personal doctor is the one best qualified to reveal your inner feelings," the Doctor answered gently. "Now, I think we'd all best get outside and confer on this situation. There's little wrong with this young lady. Perhaps when we have come to a

decision regarding her, she will have recovered consciousness."

"You too seem slightly perturbed about her, Doctor," remarked Doctor Eileen, as they moved away. "What is your ostensible reason for that?"

"She is a fugitive, Doctor Eileen, by the looks of things. Now her maladjustments are in our hands. If I am perturbed at all it is only because I foresee an increase in our crop of significant situations."

Their voices faded as they went out, merging into the murmur of talk coming from the crowd outside.

The girl on Gavin's couch lay quite still, recalling in complete puzzlement the conversation she had just heard. Of course, she had been warned to look out for something odd . . . It had been all she could do to keep her eyes shut.

She opened them now.

With a shock, she found that, instead of the room's being empty, as she had expected, a young man with a mournful expression was sitting close by, regarding her. He leant forward with an elbow on a knee. Their eyes met. His pallor changed to a pale port wine colour.

"Uh . . ." he said. He stood up and smiled diffidently. Perhaps he was twenty-three, her own age; only his complete lack of self-assurance made him look her junior.

You must be Gavin, she thought. And you are still under the stimulus of my good looks. But she kept her expression serious, fluttered her eyelids, and said drowsily, "Where am I?"

"Are you feeling better?" the young man asked. "There's a mug of water here, if you feel up to taking a sip."

He held it for her while she drank. It was good; she gasped with its coldness.

"Now I feel well enough to talk a little," she said. "My name's Dora; what's yours?"

"I'm Gavin Prouse. I—Oh, but I've just remembered." He became very agitated, and began to recite: "A complete cure cannot develop without complete data. To possess complete data, the Doctor must be present at every significant situation."

"What does all that mean?" Dora asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

"Why, it's the basis of the whole treatment!" Gavin exclaimed. "It means I mustn't get into a significant situation with you; it would impede the analysis of my case. You mean to say you don't know that?"

"I can't quite grasp it," Dora said cautiously.

He smiled with relief at her, and radiance replaced the lost look. For a moment his face was frank and handsome.

"That's my trouble too," he said. "Eileen—my Doctor—sometimes despairs of me. She says I oughtn't to marry Jean until I've a better grasp of basic principles."

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he looked moodily through the glass wall behind the bed. Out in the sunshine, the conference was proceeding; Gavin detected Doctors Eileen and Saul among the crowd. It seemed to Dora, as she followed Gavin's gaze, an odd sort of conference. Short bursts of talk were punctuated by silences in which most of the crowd took out pencil and paper and made copious notes. This settlement qualified for a high nonsense rating altogether, as far as she was concerned.

Gavin caught the puzzlement on her face. Instinctively, he reached out and patted her hand—withdrawing it instantly as if it had been burned.

"I'd better go and get someone to act as locum for me till Doctor Eileen comes back," he mumbled, cheeks red again, "—before this significant situation gets any more significant."

He galloped out of the room, pausing only at the door.

"I'll be back," he said.

There was nothing in Gavin's room to hold Dora's attention: no ornament, no picture, no book; nor was she to see such things during her stay in the settlement. The furniture of the room, reduced to a minimum, was obviously home-made, solid but without style. Only something which stood in one corner and looked like a filing cabinet seemed out of keeping with the generally spartan air.

She was ready to sleep; the uncomfortable ride, stomach down across the horse's back, had tired her. But just as she began to doze, Gavin returned with four other people.

They crowded round Dora's couch, staring at her with a wonderful mixture of eagerness, fear, curiosity and welcome. Two of them were women—one a matron, the other no older than Gavin—one was a girl of perhaps fifteen, and the fourth was a white-haired man in his sixties, whom Dora took to immediately because he resembled Gavin and had the same mild manner.

"I thought everyone was at the conference," Dora said finally, when it seemed as if nobody else was going to speak.

"Oh, the conference is only for Doctors and Doctors' doctors,



naturally," Gavin replied, peering at her over the youngest girl's shoulder. "We're all patients; we don't confer."

"She's rather pretty," remarked the girl of Gavin's age, in tones anything but commendatory.

"That remark ought to be writ down," the old man said. "It's a clue to your whole character, Jean, and Doctor Betty ought to have access to it."

They began fishing for notebooks and pencils.

Ye Gods! Dora thought, patients is right—mental patients! Meanwhile, my patience is becoming exhausted.

She sat up and said pointedly, "Gavin, don't you think you'd better introduce me to these—people?"

"Uh, of course," Gavin said guiltily. "I was forgetting. I wonder why? Better make a note to tell Doctor Eileen; forgetfulness generally masks something pretty serious."

"Just you mind you 'fess up, Gavin!" the youngest girl cried. "You just made a camouflaged plea of inadequacy and you know it."

Gavin caught her by a skinny arm and dragged her in front of Dora.

"This is my kid sister, Henrietta Prouse," he announced.

"She's the bright one of the family. Very likely she won't be a patient."

"I'm gonna be a Doctor and find out more complexes than you ever dreamed of!" Henrietta shrilled, skipping out of Gavin's reach.

"And this is my, uh, mother, Mrs. Maud Prouse. Mother, Miss Dora James."

The matronly lady thrust out a hand and gripped Dora's tightly. Her eyes gleamed with military good will, her chin jutted with benevolence.

"We hope you'll feel more than integrated while you're with us, Miss James," she said. "We welcome you to our familial conflict."

"Thank you, I'm sure. I'll try not to add to your troubles."

"Ah, a deliberate, I see," Mrs. Prouse boomed. "So glad, m'dear. I'm the immediate type. The assertion-depression balance between us should be excellent."

"And this," Gavin said—rather hurriedly, Dora thought, and wondered if that was significant—"is my trial fiancée, Jean."

He pushed forward the girl who had spoken of Dora as pretty. Jean qualified for the description herself. She had a good figure and a delicate face in which any token of weakness was belied by her penetrating eyes. They seemed to be especially penetrating when they turned on Dora.

"Delighted," she said icily.

"Likewise," Dora agreed. She thought: there's something about that woman makes me want to push her over a cliff. It's nothing personal; I just *know* she isn't good for poor Gavin.

"Uh, well," Gavin said. "Now we've all got to know each other—oh, sorry, Gramp! Almost forgot about you. Suppose Doctor Eileen ought to know about that too. Dora, this is my grandfather, Mark Prouse. Gramp, meet Dora."

The old man came closer to the bed and extended a hand. His face was brown and amiable looking, Dora thought, all the nicer for a few wrinkles.

"You don't need to worry about me," he said, winking companionably at the girl. "When a fellow's too old for a Doctor, he's pretty unimportant."

"You mean—you're cured?" Dora asked.

"No sir! I'm classified Incurable. Don't you know that when a man's fifty-five he's judged beyond the help of Doctors? They let him alone then."

At this Dora laughed; then she saw from the expressions round her that Mark had intended no joke and she lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

"No sir!" Mark repeated. "No one's ever heard of anyone being really properly cured."

The awkward pause extended itself again, and then suddenly they all began talking at once. Mrs. Prouse's voice overrode the others by sheer power of timbre, and even little Henrietta fell silent.

"You seem unacquainted with our customs," she said to Dora. "Have you come a long way? Where is your settlement?"

"I must have been unconscious for some while before my horse carried me to your home," Dora said carefully. "I do live a long way away, on the other side of the mountains."

Eyebrows shot up all round the bedside like a row of cats' backs arching.

"I have heard that only wild people without Treatment live on the other side of the mountains!" Mrs. Prouse exclaimed.

"Do *I* look wild?" Dora asked demurely.

"You look *dangerous*," Jean said *sotto voce*.

"Did your horse run away with you, Dora?" Henrietta wanted to know. "Are you scared of it? What's its name?"

Relieved at this less dangerous trend in her interrogation, Dora said, "The sun was so strong it made me faint, because I had lost my hat. My horse is a stallion called Big Jim and he brought me here accidentally."

Henrietta screamed with delight and capered round the room.

"Caught you! Caught you!" she cried. "A stallion's a male sex symbol. Everyone knows that! So you must be *pretty* wild!"

The conversation remained at that prickly level for some while. With the exception of Jean's, their intentions to Dora were kind, but the only talk of which they seemed capable was an infinite series of probes, so that to chat with them was as comfortable as bouncing up and down on a bed of nails.

It was growing towards evening. Outside, the conference which had been steadily dwindling in numbers broke up. Doctor Saul went off in another direction, but Doctor Eileen came back into the house with two other men, one of them a stringy, harassed individual who kissed Mrs. Prouse.

"Good news!" Doctor Eileen cried to the room at large. "We have decided that Doctor Lloyd Akistar's sense of inadequacy

is only a temporary anxiety-dictated behaviourism. When this is explained to him he will feel better."

A babble of approval greeted this remark, which sounded totally irrelevant to Dora, now sitting on the edge of her couch. It evidently sounded the same to Gavin, for he said, with more edge to his voice than he generally used in addressing his Doctor, "And what did you decide about Dora?"

Doctor Eileen frowned. "We decided we would discuss the matter again in the morning. Dora can stay here tonight. You can sleep in the living room, Gavin."

She nodded civilly to Dora, came over to the bedside and felt her pulse. She was a strong young woman of about thirty, without feminine grace. As she clutched Dora's wrist, she began a discussion with Mrs. Prouse and an ancient woman who had just hobbled in—the place was certainly getting crowded. Discussion (meaning procrastination) and herding together, Dora decided tiredly, were endemic in the settlement. Meanwhile, she was unable to hear what Gavin's group were saying, for Henrietta was importantly introducing her to the two men who had entered with Doctor Eileen.

Dora had decided she wanted to meet nobody else that day, but her female curiosity was aroused to find that the stringy, harassed man was not only married to Mrs. Prouse but was her Doctor as well.

"Sure, Doctor and patient often marry," Henrietta said, huffy at Dora's surprise. "They have to have an affinity to start with, so naturally they're drawn together. When I'm a Doctor and I've sucked all the secrets out of my patient's libido—bingo!—I'm gonna marry him faster 'n that!"

"Don't you let your mother hear you speak like that!" Doctor Prouse implored. He looked as if he spent his life imploring.

Ignoring him, Henrietta introduced the other man as Doctor Joe—"Mother's other Doctor. I suppose you know you got to have a second Doctor if you marry the first one, 'cos that makes him not impartial?"

"I'll take your word for it," Dora said. "And am I right in deducing that each Doctor has only one Patient at a time?"

"No, wrong," Henrietta said. "You can have up to three. Doctor Joe does Peter Paring as well as Mother, for instance. And Doctor Betty who does Jean does old Ginger Bradball and Ronnie Spears. You'll be telling me next you don't have Doctors beyond the mountains! Of course, Doctor Saul is different—he's a Coordinate Doctor "

At this stage, to Dora's horror, some more people entered the house, including Doctor Saul. The babel was now intense, and still punctuated by note-taking. Dora felt like screaming—that should cause a few entries in their wretched little books. As she was considering this line of action, however, everyone began leaving the room; Mrs. Prouse was heard to announce that she would get supper, and at the words Dora realised how hungry she felt.

Only Gavin, lingering by the door, Doctor Eileen and Doctor Saul remained. The place looked deserted.

"Gavin's had too exciting a day, Doctor," Eileen said. "I'll take him into the other room and give him a Free Association; then I shall be ready for mine when you want me."

Doctor Saul nodded absently and came over to Dora's bed as the others left. Big and capable, he looked more like a pioneer than a medical man. The smile on his large, dark face was full of understanding.

"I see you think us very strange," he said. "If you settle among us, you must get used to our ways. Integration doesn't necessarily imply surrender of spirit."

"I don't want to settle. It was by accident I came here," she said. "As soon as I'm better I'll be off."

"We have fugitives here from time to time. They find us purely by accident, but they are content to stay and adjust. Gavin's grandfather, Mark, was a fugitive, I believe. When they see we hold the secret of health, they naturally wish to share it. Of course," he went on, "I am aware that the world is full of health settlements which think as we do, but these fugitives seem to find we manage the ethos of the Treatment just a little better than anyone else. How was it in your settlement?"

His quiet superiority nettled her. Ignoring his last feeler, Dora said, "I am surprised you have such knowledge of the outside world, Doctor Saul. Your people obviously aren't travellers, yet you appear to have no planes or radio or telephones or other forms of communication—not even a carrier pigeon."

Saul looked puzzled.

"I don't know what these things are you mention," he said. "The fugitives say the world is covered with health settlements like ours; it is obviously so, since the truth of the Treatment is universal. There is another settlement two days' journey down the valley, and another three days' beyond that. But we want nothing of them, nor they of us. They have their own notes to take."

It was growing dim in the room. Outside, cows and sheep

were lying down to rest. Inside, the Doctor's face in the afterglow took on a massive grandeur, Stonehenge made flesh.

He rose and lit and pumped at a portable lamp until it burned steadily. It looked and smelt as if it ran on vegetable oil. While he bent over it, Dora said, "The life my people lead is different from yours. Can I ask you a basic question without being thought silly?"

"Go ahead."

"Just what is this Treatment of yours?"

Now the glass walls were no longer transparent, the lamp making them shine like polished ebony and shuttering away the shadows of outdoors. Saul took a pace or two about the room, rubbing the back of his neck with his strong hands.

"The answer is partly what we call history," he said. "I don't know if you've heard of history—nobody goes much for it here—but it means anything that happened before grandfather's time. Nowadays, the only diseases that exist are psychosomatic or purely mental. But in history there were purely physical diseases; there was one called cancer, I remember, and one called influenza, and a whole lot more we've forgotten ever existed. They were spread from person to person by tiny creatures called viruses. History must have been a horrible place in those days!"

He paused and shuddered, and began to fiddle with the lamp unnecessarily as he spoke.

"Fortunately for us, some of the doctors of those days—they weren't real doctors—killed off all these diseases. Two of the most famous of these doctors were called Sydenham and Pasteur; their history lasted a long time, but it was only after that that real strides were made. Disinfectant is to health what birth is to a man: the mere beginning. Desplansi, in a bit of history called Twenty First Century, originated the Treatment, which takes over where disinfectant leaves off.

"Desplansi went back to an idea originated a long while before—perhaps in the Nineteenth Century, I don't know—by a Greek called Hippocrates. He showed once and for all that what we now call disease is merely non-treatment. His whole teaching was expressed in the slogan, 'Doctor, Disease and Patient: the name of this trio is Health'."

Dora looked unenthusiastic. Saul came quickly over to her and took her hands.

"You must see it," he said. "It's so beautifully simple: right living reduced to an equation. That's why everyone took it up.

A doctor cannot treat diseases properly without full knowledge of his patient's mental composition. For that they have to be with them all the time. Hence your trio: Doctor, disease and patient. It has banished the family as a basic unit of society. Medicine is, as it always should have been, a study of personality. The seat of disease is the mind—but the mind is perpetually under observation!"

His look of triumph was so intense that Dora hated to puncture it, but she could not resist one pin prick.

"I see now," she said. "It means that your society is divided roughly half and half into doctor and patient. In other words, you've not got very far towards banishing disease, have you?"

Saul threw back his head and laughed.

"Say rather we are only part way to Utopia," he replied. "Don't forget the Treatment took over a world one hundred per cent. sick; everyone was neurotic in history. We've cut that figure by half."

Despite his show of confidence, he seemed keen to avoid further discussion now he had said his piece. He patted Dora's shoulder in a paternal way and turned towards the door.

"No more talk tonight. You have years of interesting analysis ahead if you stay," he said. "I'll get your supper brought in."

"Wait!" she said, coming towards him, forgetting in her anxiety that she was supposed to be suffering from the effects of the sun. "I want to tell you about myself. I—need help. Don't you want to hear—"

"Not now," he said sternly. "In the morning we'll elect a Doctor for you—I may even take on your case myself, as Doctor Eileen is my only Patient at present. But till then you must wait; if you are to be integrated, an analysis must be made of all your self-revelations."

"I don't *want* to be integrated—" she began angrily. But Doctor Saul had gone. For a big man he had a good turn of speed.

She plonked her behind furiously down on the bed. God! What a crowd they were! Even reasonable specimens like Saul were too smug to breathe. They cared nothing about her; why, they'd hardly asked her a single question about herself. They'd been too busy introducing each other and displaying themselves!

Her anger scarcely abated when Mrs. Prouse entered with her supper, for trailing behind her came her husband and her other doctor and his other patient, Peter Paring, whom Dora had not met and refused to meet now, and several other strangers all obviously linked in the glorious fellowship of disease. Happily they all trailed

out again when Mrs. Prouse left. Happily, also, the food was good, if plain.

After she had eaten, she lay for a long while looking at the rough, unpainted ceiling. Then, abruptly, she blew the light out and tried to sleep. In the house, an endless mutter of talk went on. Her anger returned at the sound of it. Outside, bright moonlight was punctuated by the yellow oblongs of other houses. What sort of a community could so shun privacy? Dora could watch the people endlessly talking and writing. She got up, remembering something, and peered into the cabinet she had noticed earlier. In the moonlight she could see it was, as she had suspected, a filing cabinet. Several of its drawers were full of notes. Here was Gavin's life history! Dearly she wished she had a match to put to it all, to set him free. There was something very likeable about him, if it was only his unhappiness! She closed the top drawer with a slam and returned to bed.

The talk in the house died away; the lights in the other houses dimmed one by one. All was silent. Dora's anger turned to loneliness: never had she been so isolated. Now the cenobitic rays of the moon looked too cruel to bear. She began to weep into her pillow.

"Oh, Dora. It was a whisper by her side

She could not answer. Gavin sat by her, and began helplessly to stroke her hair and her arms. Nestling against her, he muttered foolish words of comfort, until finally her tears died and she turned towards him. He was smiling now; his air of uncertainty had vanished.

"This is an awfully significant situation for you," Dora whispered, but without malice.

Next morning, Dora woke early, though not before most of the settlement was up. A cock had been crowing outside her window half the night. Nevertheless, she felt capable of dealing with anything. For a start, she refused to remain in her room; they were not going to stop her seeing what went on.

Not that they had the slightest desire to stop her! On the contrary, directly she stepped into the fresh air, people made a point of showing her all they could.

She met Gavin's grandfather, Mark, sunning himself and sharpening a heavy saw. Dropping what he was doing, he greeted her eagerly. From then on, he was her official guide.

The settlement covered a lot of ground, chiefly because there

were always at least fifty yards between each house. Frequently the distance was more, and then it was apparently reckoned as a field, because animals cropped there. Although this was all the clear result of a system, the impression it produced was one of haphazardness—but not uncharmingly so, Dora thought.

All the buildings but two were dwelling houses. The exceptions, fair-sized blocks, housed, in one, a paper factory and binder's and, in the other, a sort of general factory where the chief manufactures were glass, pencils and carpenter's tools. Dora inspected everything with interest. Everyone impressed upon her how self-sufficient the settlement was, and it was only later she realised with what drastic simplification this self-sufficiency had been achieved.

Literature and music had died a natural death, although, according to Mark, they 'sang sometimes.' Dora quizzed him on religion but got only the vaguest of answers: he clearly did not know what she was talking about. The doctrine of disease of the mind had entirely supplanted that of original sin.

The whole system of technology had been scrapped. For instance, there was no canning of food; those foods which would not store naturally, or could not be pickled or salted, were just not available out of season. Communication, as Dora already knew, was out. There was no electricity. Schools, as such, had ceased to exist. Government seemed nebulous. The primitive economic system staggered along without money or banking.

"How do you manage to pay your doctor's bills?" Dora asked old Mark Prouse, interrupting a learned discourse on pig-breeding upon which he had just launched.

He ruffled his white hair in puzzlement, and then began an explanation which only slowly made sense to the girl. His historic sense was considerably less even than Saul's, which meant he laid wrong emphasis on the points he made.

One thing at least became clear. The Doctors came before the collapse of the old order, not vice versa. More and more people became Doctors; those that didn't, became patients. Being a patient took up almost as much time as being a doctor, under the new regime. The two professions swallowed all the others.

"They don't let you be ill in peace until you're fifty-five," Mark said, smiling. "Then you're declared Incurable and they let you finish your days in peace, and the Doctors finish *their* days training up another Doctor."

And that was the only system of schooling. At least it ensured that the teachers were experienced.

Soon after the original cry for Doctors went up, insufficient talent was left for industry and commerce; those spheres dwindled to critical level and disappeared painlessly as the new world of Treatment emerged.

"You see, everyone was so keen on making a success of it," Mark said. "For once the world united in a cause. The poor folk in mental hospitals—we've done away with all those now—had to be left to their own devices: they were beyond the pale; but all the rest united for health."

So now there were no trades or professions left bar medicine. The patients were non-specialist, turning their hands to anything.

"I've brought calves into the world many a time," Mark said. There was power in the sun's rays now, and he opened his shirt collar and straightened his back—partly in memory of younger days, partly because he was conscious of the attractiveness of the girl by his side. "I've sawed down trees, and got 'em sized up into planks or pulped down into paper, and I've spun yarn and I've planted trees—and corn—and vegetables, and I built my own house when I was wed. Done everything round here, down to sweeping sheep's droppings. So's everyone else. It's a pretty full life—talking apart."

"And the doctors?" Dora wanted to know.

"It's about time we went to breakfast, young lady. You ask me so many questions I never knew I knew so many answers."

But as they walked along he explained that such maintenance of order as was required fell to the Doctors; in other words, they had to make all decisions in the settlements. The Doctors themselves had a sort of inner cabinet of five Coordinate Doctors, of whom Saul was one. It was this cabinet which decided whether a child at the age of sixteen should become a patient or a Doctor.

This task of governing was evidently considered a hard job by the patients, as was diagnosing and writing shorthand, which also fell to the Doctors' lot. In return for taking on these burdens—and of course for looking after their patients—the Doctors were absolved from other work.

"They're a lot of parasites!" Dora exclaimed.

"You mean those things on dogs? Course they're not! They have to look after us patients all their lives. It's such a terrible responsibility, that some of the Doctors have to have Doctors, like Doctor Eileen, for instance. Yes, it's the worst job of all, guarding the sick. . . ."

"You're not sick, Mark! Nor's Gavin—nor any of the others!" Dora protested.

He let out a howl of injury.

"Me not sick?!" he exclaimed. "My old Doctor carried away three chests full of notes when I was given up at fifty-five. Three chests full! I am a guaranteed perpetual pre-dyspeptic with any number of vulnerable foci in my stomach, and what's more that's complicated by a dangerously high vegetable imbalance."

"Have you ever actually had a tummy ache?" Dora had to ask, for he looked a picture of fitness.

"Bless you, no! My old Doctor was too smart for that!"

He obviously thought he had out-argued her there.

Mrs. Prouse's breakfast table seated fifteen, which was fortunate, because fifteen people sat down to breakfast round it. Some of them Dora had never seen before, including two brothers of Gavin's. She fell to wondering how such large families were compatible with so little privacy. Everybody greeted Dora cordially; the strangers were introduced to her and, if they were patients, told her the main features of their mental illnesses.

Casting an appealing eye round the room, Dora signalled to Gavin to sit next to her; but the young man had already been cornered by his fiancée, Jean, and his Doctor, Eileen. She took some comfort in observing that he was obviously in a state of rebellion against Eileen—and against Jean, if the latter's angry looks were any indication. Dora was forced to sit between Doctor Prouse and a taciturn woman with wrestler's shoulders who was at once a distant relation of Mrs. Prouse's and a near relation of Jean's (the settlement being relatively small, relationships were slightly involved).

Despite her priming in the ways of this freak civilisation, Dora found most of the talk round her incomprehensible, the Rabelaisian frankness of Henrietta—whose young and piercing voice was audible above all other voices—always excepted. When the meal was over, they still sat and talked; the notebooks lying beside the plates were freely used.

From Dora's point of view, it all looked hopeless. Filled with a sudden rush of courage, she stood up. Somewhat to her surprise, they all stopped chattering and looked at her.

"Friends," she said, "you have all been very kind to me since I came here. But now I must appeal to you for help."

"What is the matter?" Doctor Saul asked at once. His natural air of authority would not have been amiss in a saner setting.

"You might have asked that yesterday, but none of you did,"

Dora said. "My horse brought me down here yesterday by accident; the heat of the sun made me faint. I was then on my way back to my own people to fetch help for a friend of mine. He and I were exploring in the mountains when his horse slipped on a rubble slope. He was pitched down into a ravine."

"Was he killed?" someone asked.

"No. By luck he fell onto a ledge about fifty feet down. A bush broke his fall; he was shaken but not seriously hurt. He has a water bottle with him but nothing else. There is no chance of climbing up or down.

"He has been there all night on that narrow ledge. He will die if he is not soon rescued. All I ask is two men to ride back with me with ropes and help pull him out."

They were silent round the table, looking at each other uneasily and avoiding her eye. Dora could hardly grasp the unwillingness written on their faces. For a moment she pictured the rugged individualists among whom she lived, who would have jumped up straightway to help a girl in a position like hers.

"He is my husband, not just a friend," she told them bitterly. "I'm not asking you much, am I?"

Gavin gave her one piercingly remorseful look and turned away. The others shuffled uneasily.

"Sit down, my girl," Doctor Saul said at length. "Unfortunately you don't know how much you are asking of us."

"I know how little I'm asking," she flashed.

"Yah! Old assertion—depression depressive!" Henrietta called. Her mother slapped her for it and four Doctors made a note of the exchange.

Ignoring the interruption, Saul rubbed the nape of his neck. It was the gesture Dora had seen last night; she wondered fleetingly whose job it was to take a note of that.

"We might be able to help," he said doubtfully. "How far is your husband into the mountains? That range is a pretty big place, I understand."

"We could get to him in an hour's riding from the foothills," Dora said impatiently.

"What is an 'hour?'" Doctor Eileen asked. It struck Dora like a blow that she had seen no clocks here. A calendar, yes. But no clocks. The subdivision of the day was something else they had jettisoned; naturally, this perpetual analysis business was too slow for any irrelevance such as minutes or hours.

"If two of you could leave with me at once, you'd be back here easily for sun-down," she said.

"Leaving at once is quite out of the question," Saul said. Agreement echoed all round the table.

"Why?" Dora challenged. "A man's life is in danger. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Doctor Prouse placed his hand consolingly over hers. Unperturbed at her angry withdrawal, he said, "Young lady, you cannot understand because you do not understand our society. We must hold a conference first and decide what is best to be done. Meanwhile you have our every sympathy, believe me."

("Stop trying to paw her hand!" Mrs. Prouse interposed fiercely).

"Keep your sympathy!" Dora said. "While you sit round this table conferring, my husband will die out there in the noonday sun."

"We must weigh carefully who will go," Saul told her. "Rest assured, we will find someone. Meanwhile, I must ask you to be as patient as possible—and to remember you are Doctor Prouse's guest, however reluctant."

"I'm sorry," Dora accepted the reproof.

Gavin was standing up, pale but resolved.

"I will go and help Dora James straightway," he said.

There was an immediate flurry of protest. Genuine admiration for him flooded Dora's heart. She could guess something of the determination that gesture must have cost. Whenever she was about to despair of these people, one of them did something warm and human. But Gavin had caused an uproar; everyone seemed to be arguing and taking notes. Henrietta hooted with derision. After a struggle, Doctor Eileen and Jean pulled Gavin down into his seat again and the former said, "Have you completely lost your senses, Gavin? Have you forgotten the basic tenets of Treatment: 'To possess complete data, the Doctor must be present at any significant situation'? Don't you think dragging a man out of a hole is significant?"

Her scolding was drowned under the hullabaloo the others were making. But the noise died when old Mark Prouse rose in his place and said roughly the same thing as Gavin had done: "I'm willing to lend a hand straightway. I'm beyond the help of Doctors."

Dora smiled her thanks, but Saul said sternly, "You know the law as well as I do, Prouse. No Fifty-fiver may interfere at all

in anyone else's life: an incurable cannot cure. Sit down and be quiet."

Then he turned to Dora and said, "Perhaps you would care to leave us while we discuss."

Reluctantly she rose.

"Now I'm seeing what you're all really like, Doctor Saul," she said.

"Not at all," he said stiffly. "A situation like this, calling upon some of us to leave the settlement, has just never arisen before. You are an unfortunate random factor."

"Mind you make plenty of notes about it, then!" she snapped, leaving the room with a flourish of skirts.

The sun climbed to its zenith, scorching the blue from the sky, and then slid gradually towards the west. An inevitable feeling of despair overcame Dora James; she waited in Gavin's room almost without thought. She could do nothing but wait. Her future lay with the conversationalists in the next room.

Only once was her solitude broken. Henrietta, surprisingly enough, appeared with an immense hunk of cold pie on a plate.

"They're still jabbering!" she whispered conspiratorially to Dora. "I cleared off. I got hungry. I thought you might be hungry too. Their trouble is they suffer from collective verbal fetishistic impulses or something."

"You're a funny girl," Dora said. "I thought you disliked me."

"Oh, you know me," Henrietta said. "Little Miss Schizophrenia. Don't choke yourself on the pie with your wild mountain habits. B'ye now!"

And she had gone.

The pie was tasty. When you looked impartially at these people, there was plenty of good in them; they were like people everywhere. If only this insane Treatment was not the be all and end all of their existence; yet even in that there was more than a grain of sense.

She gave it up and continued to wait. The next diversion occurred outside. Slowly, from all corners of the settlement, men and women were coming to the Prouse home. In about half an hour, the whole population had gathered and stood talking and gesturing.

Impatiently, Dora turned her back on them.

It was late afternoon when five men came into her room. She sat up flushing, guiltily pushing back her hair, aware she had dozed off on Gavin's bed. Knocking on doors was another little adjunct

of civilisation which had died out here. The only one of the men she recognised was Saul; courteously, he introduced the others as his fellow Coordinate Doctors. They bowed to her.

"We are sorry if we have kept you in suspense," Saul said. "It is our unanimous decision that we should help you rescue your husband. We start at dawn tomorrow."

Torn between a desire to express the gratitude they obviously expected from her and a wish to grumble because they would not start at once, Dora confined herself to saying neutrally, "Who comes with me?"

"*Everyone*," Saul said.

He might as well have hit her. She floundered for a moment, and then could only echo, stupidly, "Everyone?"

"What else do you expect, my dear girl?" a long haired man who had been introduced as Doctor Maycock said. "Obviously, it was all or none of us. Has Doctor Saul not already explained our way of life to you? Here, I am proud to say, we are all each other's keepers. To leave the settlement voluntarily is absolutely unheard of; it would produce goodness knows what repercussions in the psyche. Therefore, we must take what precautions we can. 'A complete cure cannot develop without complete data.' We are all coming tomorrow."

When the banners of dawn were red in the sky, the trek of the four thousand started. Their organisation was most impressive; so tight-knit were they that every stage of preparation took only a minimum of time. Plenty of preparation had gone on in the dark hours: apart from Dora's Big Jim, the settlement possessed only twenty mounts—a term including a couple of donkeys—used for local haulage, so that the expedition would move on foot. An appropriate stock of refreshment and provisions had therefore to be carried.

Only a few of the more ancient Fifty-Fivers and a handful of babes-in-arms remained behind to keep an eye on the farms. They stood helplessly in a thin line, waving good-bye.

It was an impressive sight. The people, for once almost silent, heading out for the foothills, their united footsteps creating an andante accompaniment. The sun, entangled in a net of cloud as it rose, splashed them with beige light. Dora was reminded of the migrations of the lemmings; these people were answering a call just as instinctive: the urge to help.

To the lowest hills was a distance of no more than eight miles. But their pace was slow, so that it was nearly noon before the first



slopes were reached. At a signal from the five Coordinate Doctors, who trudged in front with Dora, men, women and children sat down where they were and made a light meal. Obviously they enjoyed the picnic, laughing and chattering and looking far too fit to need any sort of Treatment.

Dora, meanwhile, looked grimly up at the slopes above them.

"You are not eating," said Saul gently.

"No," Dora said. "I——"

"She's worried, of course," Henrietta said. "Who wouldn't be? She reckons the buzzards may have got her husband by now. It's enough to give the lot of us the death-wish, I say!"

"Young lady, you are beginning to manifest typical aggression syndrome," Doctor Saul said severely. "Go and sit down before I place you under observation."

Dora said nothing. Henrietta faded quietly away.

The meal finished, they began to climb. The way rapidly grew steeper and more rugged. Trees were frequent enough to impede their progress without affording them sufficient shade. Heat reeled back off boulders, and they were all bathed in sweat.

"We're nearly there now," Dora said. Gavin had worked his way ahead of Doctor Eileen and was now close beside Dora. He

gave her a reassuring smile, to which she was too anxious to respond. Now that they neared the end of their journey, her heart hammered painfully.

They scrambled together up a narrow fault between two formidable outcrops of rock, whose level tops formed a plateau. A helicopter stood on the plateau, a tent pitched beside it. Three men armed with light machine guns stood guarding the fault through which Dora and Gavin now appeared, the rest of the party pressing close behind.

One of the three men, a magnificent brute in his early forties with a moustache eighteen inches across, waved his gun and shouted to Dora.

"Come no further! What's going on, Dora James? Some form of double-cross? We've been watching this mob ever since they left the township. What's the big idea?"

"I can explain it all, Lew," Dora said wearily. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Afraid nothing!" one of the armed men shouted. "We just aim to start shooting at any minute, that's all. Have you gone mad?"

"Quiet, Fred," the moustached Lew said. "This rabble looks harmless enough. We said for you to bring two, Dora, not the whole population, you damn crazy little . . . Why, I've a good mind to . . ."

Suddenly he broke off into peals of laughter. As he laughed, he punched himself furiously in an effort to stop. He dropped his gun and clutched his sides. "She's brought the whole goddam population!" he cried, going off into fresh convulsions. He finally managed to pull an angry face and say, "I may be laughing, but I'm damned angry all the same."

The settlers, meanwhile, urged from behind, were pressing up the fault. Doctor Saul appeared, digested the scene, and turned to Dora. His big face had its Stonehenge look back.

"Is this hilarious man your husband?" he asked.

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes, wondering why she felt so responsible for these people.

"I haven't got a husband," she said. "I got you out here under false pretences. I'm not married and there's no one stuck on a ledge. I only wanted two of you to come, as you know. It was all a put-up job. I hadn't really got sunstroke and I came into your town with ulterior motives. I'm sorry, Doctor Saul, really."

"You're supposed to be explaining to *me*, not him," said Lew, who had now mastered his amusement and picked up his gun.

"You are both owed an explanation. These people are not the hopeless fools we took them for, Lew." She turned back to Saul and touched his arm. "Forgive the deception, if you can," she said. "We are one wing of the Regrowth Force. We're only small and ill-equipped—this is one of the very first helicopters we've got back into service—but we're growing. We believe the future depends on our growth. We've just completed an air survey of the country, and it's covered with settlements like yours, just as you said. It means we—the Regrowth Force—have a lot to fight against.

"Or we *thought* we had. We figured man had stagnated enough, and it was time he was up and doing again. There are more important things in the world than cozy village life."

"So you came to spy on us to see what made us so cosy," Saul said. He put his hands in his pockets and sauntered to the edge of the rock, looking down upon his people, silent now and wondering. "And I suppose the two poor fellows you wanted to lure up here were to be shot, to let us know the outside world was creeping up on us?"

"We aren't that sort at all," Lew said angrily. "If you start calling us a lot of thugs there'll be trouble."

"Oh?" said Saul coldly. "You can't very well shoot *all* of us?"

He was sounding Lew, testing him and through him the Regrowth Force; Dora, realising this, sighed with relief when Lew, instead of indulging in further threats, simply muttered, "That's true I suppose."

"The men weren't going to be shot," Dora said. "They were going to be told about some of the material and spiritual things you've completely lost; they were going to be sent back and told we should return in a year to check if any progress had been made towards recapturing those things our ancestors accepted as commonplace."

"And if we'd made no progress?" Saul prompted.

"If you hadn't," Lew said, "we'd have shown you some of the things we can do that you can't —blowing up a river bed, for instance."

Saul rubbed the nape of his neck and said, "I see. You've got it all planned. Unfortunately you are wrong. Of course, I don't know what these things are we are supposed to have lost, but I do know we've managed without them, and I also know this.

Progress reached its culmination in Desplansi's Treatment; when man has adjusted, he has no further to go."

"But that's where you are wrong!" Dora told him vehemently. "The whole scheme of your so-called Treatment is deadly plausible, but it panders to the sloth in man. It's cost you your souls and left you nothing but your complexes. It's death, it's unscientific——"

"That's just what it's not," Saul contradicted. "It's the apotheosis of science, the merging of medicine, sociology and psychology. 'Doctor, Disease and Patient: the name of this trio is Health'—it took men thousands of years to arrive at that! It's the profoundest of all truths!"

Dora shook her head.

"It's only a half-truth, Saul. You only mention three contributory factors to health. There's also a fourth factor: the will to recover. You people have got too much on the ball even to *wish* to get better!"

"Hooray! Well said! Down with the invalids!" It was Henrietta, unable to keep quiet any longer. She burst from the crowd which had silently welled up onto the little plateau, and ran to Dora. "I can't even spit without being called maladjusted," she said, "I'm on your side, wild woman!"

Old Mark came out of the group and shambled across to his granddaughter.

"In that case I reckon I'd better come and look after you for a few years, Henrietta," he said. "To hell with my vulnerable foci! I shouldn't mind living with people who took me for an undiseased man."

As Dora caught their hands and smiled warmly at them, she saw Gavin in the crowd. In his eyes, she read the conflict surging through him. So, intercepting their glance, did Doctor Eileen.

"Gavin! You dare!" she threatened. It was enough. He broke away from her detaining hand and crossed to Dora. She opened her arms to him, unable to speak.

Close at his son's heels, unexpectedly, came stringy Doctor Prouse. "I've had about enough familial conflict," he mumbled, glancing back at his wife. "Doctor or no Doctor, I opt out while the opting's good."

Through the crowd, an electric murmur ran. It carried an overtone of hope. The idea of the settlement was disintegrating minute by minute, as others would after it.

"Put your weapons away, lads," Lew said to his two com-

panions. "We won't be needing them. What we chiefly want is welcome mats. Care to join us, Doctor Saul?"

But Doctor Saul was a proud man. He had to be won over before he capitulated.

"What I don't understand," he confessed later, as their camp fires on the hillside made a barrier against the night, "is how your ancestors managed to withstand the original, proselytising force of the Treatment philosophy."

Dora chuckled, wrapping Gavin's arm more snugly round her.

"Mark supplied the answer to that, Saul. There was one place, by its very nature, where Desplansi's theory could gain no ground: the old mental hospitals. Suddenly left to themselves, the patients had to fight their own way to recovery, intermarrying as they did so. Ever since then, they've been the sane and you've been the—oh, what's it matter now?"

"It's all past history. We're united now," Gavin said, and demonstrated what he meant.

Saul turned politely away to poke the fire. His notebooks burnt very slowly.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

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Agent Provocateur

Settled quietly in an Earthly paradise, with his enemies busily destroying one another, he could now be certain of his personal security

The beauty of the switch game was that it was legal. Well, Oswald corrected himself, almost legal. He looked about the polished office he had just opened on Sartorius IV and thought about business.

Business was good. A month's work and the coffers were lined again and the time was rapidly approaching when a discreet departure to another planet of the Terrestrial Commonwealth was a judicious move of self-preservation.

The trouble, Oswald decided, the only flaw, was in the ingratitude not of the customers but of the customers' friends. It was a sad reflection on human life, Oswald decided, that people had friends prepared to do bodily damage on their behalf.

The main office doorchimes sounded mellowly. Oswald smoothed his silvery hair, moistened his lips, pinched his flabby cheeks to bring a flush of blood through their sallowness and smiled brightly. As the door opened, he was brisk and cheerful and looking only seventy five per cent. of his age, which was fifty-five Terrestrial years.

"Mr. Oswald?" the newcomer asked.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance," said Oswald, rising to shake hands. He fell back into his chair, waved the customer to the soft foam leather couch and said: "Give me one minute, just one

minute. These papers——” He fiddled with a folder, and then shuffled a heap of foolscap together importantly, riffled the edges, knocked them straight and filed them away.

The plump hand he laid on the folder, for just a stroking moment, indicated plainly that this was big business.

The customer, a pale, nervous, swallowing sort of nonentity, looked suitably impressed.

“Now, Mr. —?”

“Craig. John Craig.”

“Well, Mr. Craig, and how may I help you?”

Craig began the story that Oswald had heard a hundred times on each planet where he had operated. On the hundredth sale, no matter how well things were going, he had made it an invariable rule to move on. The only time he allowed the rule to be broken was when interstellar mail was exceptionally rapid in that sector of the galaxy.

Oswald’s business had in the past been blessed with many names. One of those cognomens was the confidence trick. Now it was called the switch game.

Oswald used very often to congratulate himself that he had been born in a time when the customers were born at the satisfactory rate of upwards of one a second. The old timers, with only one a minute, must have been really sharp operators. Oswald felt a fleeting flicker of respect, then he allowed his attention to be smugly taken by the impeccable three dimensional colour blowups adorning the walls. They had served him well in the past; he piously hoped they would continue to do so in the future—for a considerable time.

He barely listened to what Craig was saying.

At last he interrupted, politely, raising one well-manicured hand. “I fully understand, Mr. Craig. Like everyone else, you have the self-same land hunger that is the birthright of the human race.”

“Well, you see,” Craig said diffidently, “me and Marge live in a flat, two rooms, on the seventieth floor. We feel kinda cramped, and when we saw your advertisements, we figured that we ought to make a break.” He breathed gustily. “A clean break. The factory is killing me. My life’s savings, Mr. Oswald, my little all, saved penny by penny over the long, hard years . . .”

Oswald’s attention was fully aroused. Cornier dialogue he had yet to hear. Craig was a phoney, and he wasn’t carrying off the deception. Was he meant to? Oswald began to worry. He kept the bland smile on his fat face, and sat there, sizing up Craig, listening to the man’s drivel, and trying to figure the angles.

Could this grey-faced nonentity be an agent for the interstellar police? Easily. Could he be a front man for some interstellar gang? Perhaps. Oswald kept himself aloof from the usual criminal element on every planet; no contact there could help him and the slightest taint could ruin him.

He sat there, feeling his ulcer begin to curl with worry, and smiling and smiling and disliking Craig more by the minute.

The man's sob story was grinding to a halt now.

Oswald decided to finalise the transaction and leave Sartorius IV with all despatch.

He pushed across the sumptuously bound volume.

"Just take your pick, Mr. Craig. Those that have been—ah—sold, are marked." He smirked. "You will find the prices marked also."

He sat back and cut a cigar, trusting that Craig's transparent absorption in the book would cover the lack of offering the man a smoke. A genuine customer, yes; this unknown—cigars cost money.

Whilst he waited, Oswald digested what information he had. Craig had a good story, a familiar one. A man saved up, becoming steadily more and more sick of his surroundings, the cramped flat, the overcrowded streets, the monotony of assembly-line work. These industrial planets were full of men like Craig—or at least, like Craig pretended to be.

Looking closer, Oswald received a severe shock.

Craig's sparse grey hair was in reality a wig. He felt sure the drawn lines in his face were grease paint. At this distance—the distance a clever man would judge a broad desk to intervene between him and the vendor—Oswald could not be sure. But he felt convinced that Craig was a much younger and tougher man than he seemed. Oswald's ulcer gave another uncomfortable wriggle and he winced.

"This one," Craig said, after a much shorter interval devoted to choice than Oswald liked.

"Very well."

He was barely able to maintain his normal oily tone of civility and the effort to prevent his hands from trembling taxed him.

The formalities were soon finished. When Craig left the office, he carried with him a deed indicating that he was now the owner of Benjamin V. In exchange he had left a considerable sum of money. Had a cheque been involved, the process would have been delayed until the bank had okayed it, before the deeds would have been passed over. Oswald sat back and for the first time in many a transaction

suitably concluded he did not rub his hands together and drink a short, silent toast to himself from the office bottle.

Instead, he took a long, steady swig.

Benjamin V. H'm. There had been no obvious reason for Craig to have chosen that planet from among so many others on the books. Offhand, Oswald could not recall just where Ben Five was or what it looked like. Not that that mattered.

The photographs and prospectus that Craig had studied were standard. They showed a lush green planet, filled with wild life, blowing with fruit trees and flowers, with ore deposits clustered thickly just beneath the surface and without a single sign of intelligent native life.

As for the planet that Ben Five actually was—in all probability it was an ugly lump of rock, sere and barren, either too hot or too cold, certainly without a single feature that would induce anyone to part with good money in order to purchase it.

That was the switch game.

The land hunger that burned in the breast of every Terran had expanded in step with the expansion of the race. No longer was a man satisfied to buy a house and garden or a farm; now he bought a planet.

There were many of them. Millions. In his middle years Oswald had taken a long and expensive trip through a large sector of the galaxy. He had stopped off at every suitable planet he could find, at every miserable hunk of rock or ball of mud, and he had planted his own radio beacons that claimed the planet in one of the many names that he used in business.

From that moment of claimancy on, those planets belonged to him. He could sell them to whom he liked. That was the law.

The fact that he sold them with the aid of photographs and details of one or two paradise planets was quite beside the point. In any case, the photographs and the prospectus and details that the customers took so hopefully with them were printed in a special way. In a very short time they would fade and vanish, the paper would crumble to its basic cellulose, and the sucker—customer, that is—would have no recourse to law.

Up to this minute it had been a sweet racket.

Now, Oswald took another drink and let his ulcer worry around his groaning insides.

At least, even though the interstellar police knew of him and—he had a shrewd and not unfounded suspicion—had been attempting

to gather evidence for some time, they could not touch him. He was never fool enough to sell the same planet twice. That would be illegal! Was Craig a policeman?

Tentatively, Oswald made enquiries. He dabbed a dainty foot in the criminal politics of Sartorius IV. What he discovered alarmed him. Craig—it was his real name—was the leader of a very tough, very desperate, very smooth operating gang of crooks who dabbled in anything that would bring in easy money. He began to sweat.

He realised at once that they had thought he operated a legitimate business. They had wanted a planet on which to retire, to spend their amassed loot. With their money and their facilities, they could operate anything they liked there. Oswald envisioned erotic farms, gambling hells, stolen property on free sale. It made a fascinating picture, on a planet that tied in with the details he had sold Craig.

On a little airless ball of rock, though . . .

Frenziedly, Oswald checked his own old records. At last he discovered Ben Five. He groaned. An odd little place, right on the fringes of Earthly dominion, hard up against the Vegan Empire, Ben Five was no-one's idea of paradise. It had an atmosphere, of sorts, and rock, and that was about all.

The only ray of hope in the mess was that the police weren't breathing down his neck. They only needed one small toe-hold, and then they would claw their way right in. Oswald decided to leave Sartorius IV immediately.

He packed and left. He spent money freely, as was his wont, and spaced in style. He chose a small, old-established planet where industry was lavish and where there might be expected to be found many men willing to pay money to own their own planets.

But there was no savour in it. He was still worried. He could see very clearly that he would be in extreme danger if Craig and his henchmen ever discovered him. His changes of name and location could not fool them for ever—could they?

Oswald sweated and made a great decision.

He would retire.

But first—to find the biggest sucker of them all.

In retiring, he would sell out the business. That meant one of two ways. He could approach a legitimate planetary estate agent and sell up as though he himself were on the level. Or he could find a man who thought as he did. Which was it to be?

The war decided Oswald.

For some reason the Vegan Empire had taken a strong dislike to

the Commonwealth of Terra. They expressed this by shooting up all Terran ships that came their way. They began to encroach on Earth's preserves. Everyone was annoyed, angered—and not a little fearful. No-one wanted the insanity of an interstellar war.

Oswald realised that interstellar travel would shortly be heavily curtailed. He decided that he would like to spend the war on Earth and left for home at once.

Before leaving, he sold up—to a man who treated him as a fine old member of the planetary estates profession and who, over sherry, drove a hard bargain.

"You're the lucky man, Oswald," he told him. "We all work for this day, when we can retire from the profession."

"I'm sure that you will be very happy with my book," Oswald said with equal uncton. "It's a good one. You should have no difficulty, even with this stupid war, of doing fine business."

"I hope so," the estate agent said, smiling. "If I can retire as early as you, and go to Earth—ah!"

Oswald, in a fine pink glow of confidence and mutual goodwill, pocketed the banker's order and departed.

Life on Earth, living as a distinguished but inconspicuous millionaire, was going to be very good.

When he found out how the war with the Vegan Empire had begun a great weight was lifted from his shoulders.

It appeared that the Vegans had set up a remote early warning radar chain, in order to keep an eye on their unruly Terran neighbours. It had been common knowledge that any truly awkward rift between the two galactic cultures might lead to a conflict. Earth maintained her own early warning line. The cultures sprawled hard up against each other, and waited for the first break in the hegemony.

Craig and his gang had provided that break.

They had landed on Ben Five and by all accounts had decided that, having been sold a pup they were stuck with it. Oswald read the official account with great pleasure, smoking a cigar and reclining on a deck chair in the Bahamas.

Craig's men knew that they could not return to Sartorius IV; the police were too strong for that; they had too much on them. But on their own planet, the gang could make what laws they wished, could open a free port. This they proceeded to do, under domes, and the sort of hell planet that Oswald had envisaged rose into a reality.

The Vegans did not like this.

One of their early warning radar stations was located on Ben

Five; the planet was in that nebulous sphere of influence where any body belonged to whoever happened to be in possession.

Craig and his gang tossed the Vegans off.

In return the Vegans sent a task force of their Navy and Marines and Craig and his gang ceased to exist.

Oswald puffed luxuriously, and read on, replete.

The Earth had, from sheer force majeure, to reply.

It was unfortunate that a war had started as a result; but the great, the sheerly wonderful news, was that he, Oswald, had now nothing more to fear from Craig and his gang. Vengeance was no longer a shadow hovering over a bright future.

He found something satisfying at the thought that a complex Vegan Task Force had taken the trouble to rid him of a personal problem. And the good old Terran Space Navy was hard at work putting things right. Oswald had plenty of money; he'd never paid a penny in taxes in his life, but he took a personal pride and delight in the exploits of the Navy as though he had contributed to their upkeep.

He lived for a few months in glorious idleness. The sun warmed him, good food and wines kept him mellow and well fed. This was, indeed, the life of Reilly.

Then the Interstellar Police called on him.

He met them as they descended from their helicopter in the landing lot to the rear of his white painted villa.

He had no qualms. "Ah, Inspector, this is a pleasure. And to what do I owe the honour of this visit?"

The Inspector was a brisk, cat-like man. He had black hair that escaped neatly from beneath his uniform cap.

"I'm Inspector Harris," he said politely. "Mr. Oswald?"

Oswald blinked. "There must be some mistake," he said. "My name is Malcolm Ashley."

A breath of fear touched him.

"H'm, let me see," the Inspector said, consulting a little notebook and photo-file. "Fifty-six, balding, paunchy, brown eyes, ulcer, false dentures——"

"But that could be anybody my age!" protested Oswald, rashly.

"Mr. Oswald," Inspector Harris said firmly. "We have reason to believe that you have been trading for years as a planetary estate agent." He elaborated.

Oswald was crushed. Then he revived. "Well, Inspector, suppose I am Oswald? What of it? All I've ever done has been strictly legit. You can't touch me for selling planets that belong to me to

men who want to buy them. I cannot be responsible for the fallacies they read into what they see of the prospectuses."

Harris smiled. It was a nasty smile. "Oh, that's right enough, Oswald. We've been onto you for years. But we knew we couldn't touch you. The men you bilked had no proof. You were just this side of the law, the way you handled your business. You've been clever, I will say that."

"Well, then?" said Oswald, beginning to perk up.

"But now I have to tell you that you are under arrest——"

"I know—anything I say will be—but what are you charging me with? I'm in the clear. You said so."

Oswald was a very worried man. His ulcer was prodding him like a pig-sticking lancer.

One of the sergeants laughed. "You'll get the book thrown at you, Ossie."

Inspector Harris said: "Off the record, Oswald, we're chuckling over this. We've wanted you for years and couldn't prove a thing. Now we've got you. You'd better come quietly."

"But what for?" shrieked Oswald.

"I have to charge you," said Inspector Harris with great relish, "with actively and malevolently originating a state of war between the Terran Commonwealth and the Vegan Empire." He smiled, holding out the handcuffs. "And what you'll get for starting an Interstellar War, I hate to think."

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Friction

The old ways had persisted long enough but, by the very nature of things, there were many who would resist their passing

Illustration by John J. Greengrass

From deep in the bowels of the planet came rumblings.

Tremors vibrated up into the stone flags of the floor, quivered into a stone seat on which crouched a young woman. So strikingly attractive was she that no one would have noticed in a first glance that her dress was homespun and her few feminine ornaments either old or homemade.

Wisps of mortar dust puffed from between the roughly dressed rock of the wall facing her, and creaks voiced the protest of thin planking and slender cross members in the other three walls and roof.

As though neither hearing nor feeling any of these evidences of the earthquake, her full lips pouted while large, slanting eyes stared at an inscription cut into the headstone of the double doors in front of her.

BEWARE A PERSUASIVE VOICE. PROMISES OF A LIFE OF EASE SELDOM LEAD TO CONTENTMENT. TO OBTAIN A SENSE OF TRUE FULFILMENT MEN WERE MEANT TO WORK.

Booted feet, approaching, rang on stone. Her hands, beautiful in spite of being calloused, gripped the cold slab of the seat and she leaned forward. The doors burst open. A man, powerful and arrogant as a young bull, stamped towards her.

She rose. He thrust her aside, went striding out, knobby fists clenched.

She hurried after him. Raised voices clamoured from beyond the stone wall. One quavered, with the arrogance of age, "Hang the Traitor!" just as the doors closed. The underground shocks faded out. In silence the young couple burst one after the other into the light from the red star small in the sky.

He halted suddenly.

She recoiled from the venom twisting his fresh complexioned face. "Hraps darling——"

"Stop following me, can't you, Zori," he muttered hoarsely. "We both knew what they were going to do to me. I should have known better than to listen to that damned Earthman's promises that he would leave in a month if he couldn't help us. A black day for me when he came here to dazzle you with his talk of great cities and fine clothes on far off worlds."

"Don't blame him, Hraps. Perhaps he will help——"

"I want no help from a foreigner against my own people!" Hraps shook his fists at her. "Haven't you any loyalty to our forefathers?"

She pouted. "I only wanted our lives to be brighter and less like those of animals."

"So we aren't good enough for you, eh?" he stormed. "If you're so keen on this so clever Earthman, why don't you go make up to him? I'm no man for a clever wench like you after you've got me kicked out of the place I inherited."

"Hraps!" Her magnificent brown eyes flashed with an anger reflecting his own. "You've been sorry for losing your temper before, but this time you've gone too far." Straight and proud, she faced up to him. "Perhaps I will go to the Earthman."

The hiss of the hot springs below them, a volley of blasting charges and the grinding of steel wheels on rails from above, filled an awkward silence. A woman as spirited and beautiful as she would tempt any man—even a fabulously rich Earthman. Blind with chagrin, he turned his back on her.

A breathtaking crescent of mountain peaks, pink against the smoke streaked horizon to the west and north somehow reminded him of the far off wonders of which the Earthman had spoken to them both. By contrast the mines of the planet Betelgeuse IV suddenly seemed raw and puny, the lofty tripod hoists and winch cars like gallows and tumbrils, and the wooden town of the miners a prison for forced labour.

But where else was there for a miner of Betelguese to go? Ever since he could remember it had been accepted by everyone that he would take his father's place in the Council which made the laws and administered justice for the still small population of the planet. He was not even a real miner and none would want to take the trouble to train him now. He looked eastwards, down to where the land stretched away into the distance and was flat enough to serve as a spaceport.

The trading ships. But the traders blasted off with as large a load of Betelguese ore as they could, and he could neither pay a worthwhile sum to go as passenger nor had he the skill to go as a crewman. Some of the Captains might just have been friendly enough to do him a favour until he had permitted the Earthship to land and they had begun to fear its possible competition.

The Earthship. It was the cause of all his troubles. But, by Betelguese! It was beautiful. Earth must indeed be fabulously rich to build such magnificent ships. Although every bit as practical in its design as any of the traders, it stood out amongst them like Zori amongst the comparative drabness and untidiness of the other women.

Hraps wanted to look around to see if she still stood behind him. But after what had been said pride forbade even that small capitulation. His chin sank on to his broad chest. Each member of the Council ruled Betelguese IV for one of the planet's long months; other members leaving lesser administrative duties only on the last day of the month when they sat together to ratify the ruling member's decisions. The Earthship had landed at the beginning of his second such period of authority. The Earthman—he was the only one of the ship's undoubtedly large company to land—had been full of the benefits which the technologically rich Earth always likes to share with colonists. And he, Hraps—youngest and least experienced of the Council—had been tempted. He had finally been persuaded by a radiantly excited Zori to allow the Earthman to make what was called a preliminary survey of possibilities. But the survey had taken too long and the Council had been all set to have his blood, now his month was over.

Perhaps they were right. Hraps lifted his head to look up and along the slope, over mines and township, at the huge Monument which the original miners had left behind them to remind such as he of the dangers of listening to soft talk of easy benefits.

He ought to have remembered his father's warning about the impetuosity of youth . . . Now, instead of holding a respected posi-

tion amongst his fellows, he was a man with no authority, no worth while land and no useful trade . . .

His ears picked out a small sharp explosion of a different timbre from anything in the general noises of the mining life.

It was then that Hrap saw the Earthman's small landcar not far from the Monument. It had been one of the grumbles of the Council that the Earthman was setting off explosives unnecessarily, almost as though planning to irritate the underground shocks into a full scale earthquake. All the older folk remembered how the growing shaking of the rock up by the Monument had made them decide to move the entire village down to its present position, further from the end of the mountain chain.

The Earthman was getting into his vehicle. It began to rush down, skirting around the village, towards Hrap, who felt his cropped hair bristle with rage.

The car skidded to a halt beside him. The Earthman, slender, smiling blandly, jumped out lightly. "Well, Hrap, my big and clever friend, did you manage to talk sense into your tradition bound Council?"

"No." Hrap clenched his jaw. No miserable know-it-all little squirt was going to fast talk him out of the proper course of action a second time. "They talked sense into me!"

He sprang.

Quick as a flash, the Earthman sidestepped.

Hrap blundered two paces, swung around and grabbed with powerful hands.

A rumble preceded an earth tremor. The Earthman's mad-deningly serene eyes seemed to go blank. Hrap found a thin arm in his muscular grip, and roared in triumph. "Got you! Scared of the shocks—are you?" He pulled.

The Earthman slid forward. Hrap, caught off balance shifted his feet. The Earthman bent. Hrap felt his feet leave the trembling rock of Betelguese IV. He thudded, full length, to the ground as the planet's gravity had its inevitable way with him.

He sat up, mouth open.

The Earthman's cool eyes watched him. "You're not seriously hurt, I hope? You must admit I had a right to use whatever skill I have against your far superior physical strength."

Hrap climbed slowly to his feet. On desolate Betelguese a man learnt early in life not to waste energies struggling against anything unbeatable.

A faint rumble trembled up from somewhere in the rock below

them. The Earthman looked thoughtful. He beckoned Hrap. "Come over here." He pointed to the flat drums just inside the wheels of his vehicle. "There are the brakes which slow this jalopy. Feel them."

Hrap reached around the nearest wheel; whipped back his hand. "Ow!" He thought his hand had been scorched, but saw that the sensation had been shock and not real pain.

"Friction——" The Earthman began to explain like some prim teacher of children.

But Hrap did not listen. He had seen that Zori was watching with eyes wide with fascination. She had seen the Earthman make him look small twice in as many minutes.

He strode off blindly.

Only belatedly did he realise that he was heading towards the main mine workings. A dozen men were loading ore by hand into a gravity powered hill railway—each full car, by descending to the great plain on which waited the trading ships, pulled up an empty car to be filled—and all glared at him and muttered amongst themselves. A woman, once Zori's rival for his favour, paused in her knapping of the larger stones to mock: "Who tamed you, Hrap? The Council members, that Zori wench, or your precious Earthman?" A boyhood friend, coming down a quarry face trailing a detonator wire, shouted: "Stay away from me, Hrap, you traitor." An old man, bent under a load of ration boxes, wagged a white beard, "Oh Hrap, how your father would have been disappointed in you!"

Hrap clenched his teeth. He plodded on, skirting around the town and finally pausing in front of the Monument. He took off his cap.

Cut from a single block of black marble, it had been imbued by the sculptor with the spirit of the men who had first won their livelihood from this isolated and unfriendly world.

One hundred figures, men and women, carrying pick and shovel, rope and sections of winding gear, detonator and dynamite, they symbolised by their attitudes the tremendous drive and determination which had challenged the alien conditions and scorned the proffered help of an Empire which had seemed to them degenerate.

On a planet nobody else wanted, they had had to pay the heavy freight charges for importing every ounce of food. They had worked as hard as slaves and lived more austere than most monks so that they might build their own pyramid of independence.

WE, MINERS OF BETELGUESE, ARE FREE AND PROUD.

HAVING ESTABLISHED OURSELVES HERE BY OUR OWN BLOOD, SWEAT AND SACRIFICE, WE LEAVE THIS MONUMENT AS A REMINDER THAT WORK IS HONOURABLE AND THAT SMOOTH SPEECH IS UNTRUSTWORTHY. FOR MANY MEN WILL UNDOUBTEDLY COME AFTER THE PIONEERING IS DONE TO TRY TO CHEAT OUR DESCENDANTS OUT OF THE INHERITANCE OUR EFFORTS HAVE WON FOR THEM. THERE ARE ALWAYS THOSE WHO, ALREADY RICH, WILL NEVERTHELESS INTRIGUE TO ADD TO THEIR WEALTH BY TAKING AWAY HARD WON INDEPENDENCE AND POSSESSIONS FROM THE WORKERS UPON WHOM THE ECONOMY OF THE GALAXY MUST ACTUALLY, IN FACT, ALWAYS REST.

Hraps turned from the inscription chiseled into the base of the marble and looked back down the slope.

The man from the far off cradle of mankind was talking to Zori. Hraps could imagine her big eyes, wide with wonder. A persuasive fellow, that Earthman, clever in getting his way with ordinary people not used to subtlety. "I don't want you to break any of your laws, Hraps," the Earthman had said, with his precise little smile. "You need not actually sell me any rights or land on your planet." Such smooth talk. "All I want, is for you to allow me to look around and take measurements, and then later on to listen if I find I can help you to better your living conditions here."

Tremors shuddered strongly up through the rock beneath the Monument.

Hraps could tell that the Earthman felt them where he stood for he left off his talking to Zori and sprang into his car. A sharp report echoed. Miners looked up from their labours and stared down suspiciously while the Earthman's car moved along the slope towards the village and stopped. A second report set the watching miners talking angrily together. The Earthman had told them he only fired off explosive charges to use echo sounding equipment to check on what was happening beneath the surface of the planet.

But such things were best left alone. Ever since men had come to Betelguese IV there had been earthquake shocks. Puny man could do nothing about such things. During Hraps's lifetime there had been houses shaken down into ruins about their inmates' heads but, because building materials were kept as light as possible, serious injury was almost unknown.

Rumbles came from the nearest peak in the mountain chain. Smoke puffed up from it. In the first shadows of the evening, Hraps glimpsed a flicker of red light.

He sighed. This was home.

He abruptly turned his broad back on the accusing bulk of the Monument, and looked above the haze from the hot springs, at the foot of the rock slope, out over the sparse scrub of what the Earthmen had called "a rift valley". Apparently all planets developed them as their crusts contracted and sank inwards. The Earthman had said that this one on Betelguese IV extended south like a great oval basin three thousand miles at its greatest width, two thousand at its least. It seemed that such measurements were easy to make with an Earthship's marvellous equipment from high above the limits of an atmosphere and it was this vast crustal formation which had caused the ship to land.

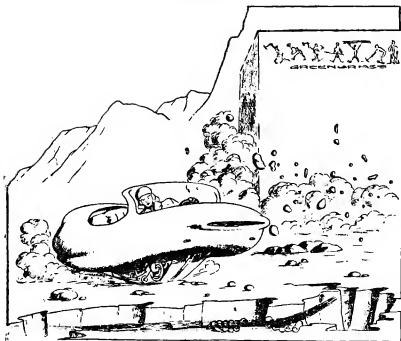
Hraps stiffened his shoulders. A vague unease born of the older culture's unknown powers drew his weatherbeaten young face into new creases.

He began to trudge down the slope. Jagged stones skidded away from his boots and occasional sparks struck out from the hobnails into the approaching purple twilight.

He started a long stride downwards with his right foot. The large, loose rock on which it should have gripped moved away as though suddenly alive. A tremendous roar, somewhere between an explosion and the snapping of a million timbers, stunned his senses. His foot sank into nowhere. A huge crack widened in front of him. His clutching hands clawed down on the rough rock of its further edge, and gripped. His feet, deep in the chasm, swung down and he kicked desperately until toes found purchase. Dust and flying fragments of stone rose around him.

A boulder rolled past him as he struggled over the raw edge. The rock shuddered and groaned. He staggered and saw loose fragments pouring down the slope into the abyss. He went stumbling downhill. Dust rose out of the straining ground like steam forced through a cracked boiler casing. His feet slithered as the vast swaying of great segments of the planet's surface flung him about. A violent, grinding subsidence hurled him to the ground.

He started to struggle up. A dreadful screeching from above struck such terror into his heart that he could not move. Head twisted on bull neck he stared fascinated into the billowing dust higher up the slope.



With a roaring, grinding cacophony of hell, a fantastic shape loomed through the murk.

Black and inevitable as the coming of the night, it grew into a squarefronted bulldozer topped with curved and contorted figures.

He stumbled backwards, stricken with the possibility of his fragile flesh and blood being ground to something like a smear in the side of the valley. Sparks leapt from the monster's edges as it jolted ponderously over the rough rock.

He fled downhill. And all the time the din behind roared louder and the rock under his feet trembled with the shocks of the great mass grating after him.

His feet seemed leaden; his racing thoughts seemed to explore every possibility of escape so that he appeared to move outside of his body and see the descent of the giant Monument as his ancestors' instrument of revenge upon him. Puny individual man could do nothing against the intangible forces such as influenced the thoughts of whole planetary populations—or the physical violences capable of moving the crust of a planet itself in great quakes.

It would soon be over.

Something hit the small of his back. He felt himself scooped

up. A juddering, swaying vibration terrified him. He fell backwards. The figures of the Monument had come alive and had kidnapped him the better to take their revenge. A cushioned something struck his shoulders.

The figure in front of him was too slight to be one of the statues: it was the Earthman.

Hraps struggled up into the seat against which he had fallen. The Earthman hunched over a steering wheel. All around them were dials and mysterious equipment, some let into the framework of the vehicle and others, if their gleaming fittings were any indication, evidently added after its manufacture.

The dust thinned. The Earthman glanced over his shoulder, past Hraps. He spun the wheel. The car swung around and drew up.

The monument was nearing the bottom of the slope. In the gloom caused by the billowing dust and fading day, it actually glowed red around its base, smoking like a monster indeed from hell.

It smashed, still travelling quickly, into the timber yard. Tree trunks shattered like matchwood. Both Earthman and Hraps ducked involuntarily as a great fragment soared high through the dust towards them.

Little flames leaped in the wake of the runaway Monument. It slowed. A gush of flame came from in front of it as it settled, kinetic energy spent, against a pile of planks.

The Earthman panted as he looked back at Hraps. "By Sol! Weren't you excited by all that?"

"No." Hraps sat quite still. The forces of fate were too vast for the human imagination. "It's nothing unusual . . . except for the Monument being moved—" Hraps broke off to lean forward. The entire area around the black carving seemed to have been seized with spontaneous ignition. Precautions against fire were very strict, especially during the long, dry summer. There was something uncanny about what was happening.

"Friction," said the Earthman, watching him, "plays odd tricks . . . but it's simple enough. When things rub together there is heat. A small friction makes a small heat, and a really large friction makes a really large heat."

Hraps knitted his brows politely. "We are workers here, not thinkers."

"Trouble is," the Earthman reproached him, "you don't try to understand."

"The important thing," said Hraps, and he held his hands so

that the Earthman would not see how the rock had lacerated their palms because he feared the other's sympathy, "is that you risked your life to save mine."

"Men do that sort of thing, everywhere." The Earthman sighed. "Even Earthmen do it. I'm glad you weren't hurt—" he ended, and looked awkward for the first time since Hrap had known him.

The crackling of the spreading blaze filled a stillness which seemed quite shocking after the din of a few minutes before. The Earthman bent over his instruments. Hrap glimpsed the town and mines through gaps in the drifting dust. Nothing seemed harmed over there. The surface movements had all been confined to the valley side just around where the car stood.

"The subsidence," said the Earthman, "came before I expected it." He seemed apologetic. "Exact calculations are not easy." He punched keys on a machine, checked with the array of instruments around him, added more key punching, scratched his chin, "H'm," and looked inquiringly at Hrap.

Hrap stood up. "T-thanks for

"I want something from you," interrupted the Earthman. No longer persuasive nor explanatory, his tone was as sharp as that of a general executing a plan of battle.

Hrap nodded. "I will do whatever you want." The Earthman had saved his life.

The Earthman said, "I know you have hereditary ownership of a piece of land where the ore has been mined out. It's just a bit further along the slope here, more or less in line with the mountain chain which forms the edge of the rift valley." He paused. "I don't suppose that this is likely to suggest anything to you, but I want to go there—even though my instruments lead me to believe that very soon it will be a dangerous area to be in."

Hrap shrugged. Smoke from the burning timber was being carried out over the rift valley. Dust from the earthquake was settling. It had really been only a brief shock prolonged for him by the sliding down of the Monument. People were hurrying from the town and mine workings—perhaps the entire local population. Twilight was making outlines uncertain but the number of bobbing lights increased Hrap's sensation of loneliness.

"Do what you want with me," he said.

The Earthman, now indistinct in the dusk, made rustling movements. Small lights glimmered amongst the instruments. Larger

lights cut the darkness along the slope and they moved forward, swaying over the rough surface.

"Here we are," said the Earthman at last. He rattled off a string of figures, apparently some kind of code, into a microphone.

In the shadowy back of the vehicle, Hraps scowled. It was not good to feel that he was a pawn in the hands of a stranger. The Earthman, head bent, studied his instruments. Hraps glared at the man's headphones and felt angrier. Here he sat, not knowing what was going on, with nowhere to go on this bare rock, with his friends turned against him, his girl lost, and himself perhaps somehow betraying his own kind by his very presence here.

"Hraps," the voice of Zori whispered out of the dark.

He turned slowly. She had approached the car without either of them being aware of her presence. "Zori, what are you doing here? The Earthman has spoken of there being danger here. Please go quickly."

"Oh, Hraps. I won't stay if you don't want me to, but I had to warn you. There's been a mass meeting of everyone in the ashes around the Monument. People say you helped the Earthman topple it over in revenge for the punishment you were given by the Council." He heard her gulp. "I'm sure they'll come up here after you."

Hraps heard his own blood singing in his ears. It would look as though he had been doing something to the Monument. Men near the timber yard would have seen what happened. . . or enough, through the dust and smoke, to give them the impression that they had seen what others would suggest must have happened.

"Go away, Zori," he whispered. "Don't you get involved with me. I'm no good to anybody."

"Don't say that, Hraps, darling." He saw her eyes glisten large with reflected light, heard her rapid breathing, felt her emotional urge to share his trouble, and knew again the redness of frustrated fury which threatened to blow him a second time into berserk action.

Then he felt, rather than saw that she had gone. He leaned over the side of the vehicle. "Zori! Be careful!"

"What's that?" The Earthman lifted his head.

But Hraps was staring back along the broken rock of the slope. Lights were flickering, hundreds of lights, each a vengeful eye staring at him out of the gloom. They advanced steadily as he watched. A shiver, not entirely the chill of the night, ran through him.

Held rigid by conflicting emotions, he felt the seat beneath him tremble. Faint rumblings touched his hearing, but scarcely registered in his intelligence.

"Here it comes," said the Earthman, turning back to his instruments. "Quake on schedule."

Hraps clenched his fists. Apparently a man brought up in the safety of Earth's civilisation could not understand the raw justice that was meted out on a planet like Betelguese IV.

The Earthman whipped off his headphones and clapped them over Hraps's head. "Listen to that!"

A dread, rumbling growl tapered off into a hissing that rose to earsplitting volume. Giant bubbles seemed to be rising and bursting in some viscous liquid. The very planet below them seemed to be coughing and spitting and wheezing.

Hraps dragged off the headphones. Without them the earth tremors and muffled rumblings seemed nothing more than those to which he was used. He wet his lips.

The Earthman jammed the headphones back into place on his own head.

A lurid glare burst from the nearest peak. Hraps, looking up, saw that all the other peaks were hidden behind the one which was erupting. The reddish light glistened and gleamed on the lava runs and cinder rubble pouring down towards the level on which their car rested.

"Millions and millions of tons of rock pressing down . . ." the Earthman was muttering. "Entire sections of rock strata rubbing together under all that weight above. The whole upper section of the crust sinking down as the primeval rock shrinks below it. What friction!" Oblivious to Hraps, he shook his head. "What heat there must be stored down there. And you can actually hear the water turning into superheated steam as it touches the melting rocks. Like the gases in fermentation. The pressure can't get out now that the hot springs have been sealed by the avalanche subsidence. Something must go, soon."

He spoke rapidly into his microphone, calling his ship and going off again into what Hraps had taken to be a prearranged code.

The crowd was much closer. They were running. Distances were deceptive in the darkness. Smoke was beginning to blacken out the stars. An angry mob murmur came above the familiar rumble of the ground. Here and there Hraps caught the glint of a brandished tool.

He touched the Earthman's arm. "My people are outraged by what I have done and what they think I have done. I no longer care what they do to me. But they may attack you if I stay here with

you. By going to meet them I can repay my debt to you." He sprang over the side of the vehicle.

The oncoming mob bayed like hounds which had caught the scent. Hrap's halted, big hands on hips. He had his pride, the pride inherited from self-reliant forebears.

And suddenly he knew that he had always been waiting, like molten lava ready to gush up from the level of unrelieved manual labour into a volcanic mountain of power, for a chance to do something big for his people. The Earthman had only been the guiding force, taking advantage of that hot hidden urge and using it and Zori's exciting pressures upon it for his own purposes.

Thunder beat about Hrap's head, blotting out the noise of the crowd. A glare from above, almost sun strength in its power, flashed and glittered on pickaxe and shovel and crowbar upraised in the hands of his people, the stony-faced fellow workers of Betelguese.

Shadows lengthened as he looked around him for a last time. The Earthship on its pillar of landing fire, coming down in stately majesty not far off if he—primitive Hrap of Betelguese—could only have made use of mighty forces as did the Earthmen within that fabulous ship. Yes, that had been his dream—great power to release his people from their endless drudgery.

He faced those people ready to die. It was their very human nature that feared to strike out and seize the nettle danger of advances such as the Earthfolk might offer.

The rock shook and pressed up briefly against his feet. Sparks rose like curtains of fire. Dust and smoke gushed up and cut off his view of the mob. Heat beat over him as the rock swayed back and sent him staggering. Fire flashed up above the wall of darkness in front of him.

He backed away. Sharp reports accompanied brilliant flashes. A fragment of rock whistled past him, skittering away down the slope. Cinders showered around him.

"Hrap's!" The Earthman's yell was all but drowned by the eruption. "Get in——"

Hrap's jumped.

The car jolted forward. And suddenly Hrap's terror fell away from him. His world might be falling apart as the planet's internal fires enveloped everything with heat and disaster, but it would be all right. They were heading for the glorious ship.

A section of the proud hull hinged outwards. Down this

trundled huge, oddly shaped machines, reddened by the flickering glow.

"You caused those to be made," shouted the Earthman. He gestured with excitement in a way that Hrap had never even expected of the cool little man. "You had the imagination to let me make the land-based tests to be sure that there was useable heat down there. Now, after a little help from me this new volcano has come in, and you and I—we are going to help put a cap on it so that when the lava comes gushing up in a few hours' time its heat can be turned into power that'll work for your people for decades to come."

Hrap smiled to himself as he clung to the side of the vehicle.

Three months and one week later, he was in the same ante-room in which Zori had awaited news of the Council's verdict on his behaviour. Now she stood, proud and straight at his side, although she fidgeted a little—with either excitement or boredom, he could not be sure which.

The Council had been listening to a talk given by the Earthman. To maintain and use power from the internal fires generated by the crust of their own planet, most workers would have to learn new skills. And to pay for the Earthman's teaching and equipment, the mines would have to be much extended and far more efficiently worked. Life it seemed was still going to be arduous, and the Council had been glad of that, even though it still resented the change.

With expressions varying from outright doubt to hesitant enthusiasm they were watching a stonemason making a single word addition to the inscription above the double doors of the Council Chamber.

TO OBTAIN A SENSE OF TRUE FULFILMENT,
MEN WERE MEANT TO WORK *TOGETHER*.

"Hrap," said Zori's familiar eager whisper in his ear.

He turned. Her big eyes almost seemed to flash with the glow of sunlight reflected off the stone floor. She was looking in the opposite direction from everyone else, through the outer doorway, at the magnificent Earthship on the edge of the rift valley.

"How long," she murmured, and she squeezed his arm, "before we will have learnt enough to have one like that for our very own?"

"I don't know," he said doubtfully. "Perhaps our children will have them. . ."

She began to pout. "I want one while I am still pretty enough to go to Earth in it!" she told him.

E. R. JAMES

Take Your Partners

Bobby Roper was the best ballroom dancer on Earth; why, even the aliens from Sirius thought so

Everybody else has had his say and I think it is about time I unloaded a few words. But don't think for a minute that I'm going to make excuses for myself. No sir! I haven't changed my opinions one little bit and anything I tell here and now is not—repeat not—by way of an explanation for my actions. I would do exactly the same things again if the same situation arose.

Anyhow, as it turned out, I was right after all. I maintained all along the aliens would either get whipped, absorbed or go home of their own free will. And that was not being clever. Any kid with a history book in front of him could have prophesied the same result.

There always have been invasions. Look as far back as you please and you'll find there was always some place being occupied by somebody from another place. It's the natural thing. Joe has something Jack hasn't—so why shouldn't Jack do a little equalising? It happens all the time. The only difference between me and anyone else is I'm not afraid to admit it.

As I always say, what's the difference in a hundred years? Take any case you please and you'll find that after a hundred years all the flap and hoopla was for nothing. Most times the invaders find that their conquest wasn't what they were looking for at all and they move

on or go home. Almost as often they stay—but by then they have got soft; before they know it they're speaking the language of the people they vanquished, and why not, when they are always outnumbered if you include the old and the young and the women.

And next thing they know those selfsame women have got them hogtied and equipped with hybrid kids with mouths to feed and backs to elothe and I'll bet they wish they had never left the old homestead. At least back home they didn't have in-laws who looked sidewise at them all the time.

Which brings me to the opinions which made me unpopular. Leave it to nature, I said. An invasion is an invasion. What's the difference if this time it's the whole world that has been invaded and the invaders are from another world out in space?

That's what I said. And even if you have no time for the tabloids, you get to hear things just the same; so I also said it's nobody's fault but our own for trying to get space-borne. It stands to reason—you put your hand in somebody's pocket, you should expect to get slapped.

My reactions might have been different if the aliens had done me wrong. But for as long as they were here they put money in my pocket, so why should I have complaints?

There were a lot of people who did suffer. I mean the ones who kicked. They turn up during every invasion. All of a sudden they come out in a rash of patriotism. Yesterday their country was not fit for dogs to live in. Today, just because somebody else has stepped in, it is the promised land itself and they get a compulsion to make things difficult for the invader. Then they squeal when the invader squashes their little resistance and sabotage groups.

Unfortunately for people like myself, neutrality is not recognised. Either you are a patriot or a collaborator. I got myself classified within a week of the Sirians' arrival.

For some unknown reason it is the fashion during occupation to shut down on entertainment. Instead of trying to relieve the gloom, the vanquished seem to prefer to wallow in it. Life becomes intensely earnest. Gaiety goes out the window. The black weeds of mourning are decreed.

All of which comes very hard on those whose business it is to entertain. When they locked the ballroom doors all over the world I found my bread and butter cut off. And when I asked what I was supposed to do next, I was told to get myself a gun. Which I did not do, of course, there being no percentage in it.

However, I had not got through forty years of life without learning a few angles. Come to think of it, I must have been a whiz in history class when I was a pup because the first thing that occurred to me was that invading troops always wanted entertainment, whether they were ancient Greeks or newcome Sirians. On account of their physical make-up the Sirians were not in the least interested in the female Terran form. Nor would they have crossed the street in search of culture. But when the whisper went round that they were crazy about dancing, I had my ears wide open.

Before the invasion was a fortnight old, I had rounded up a dozen or so of the couples who did the world circuit of tournaments and we were putting on nightly shows for the aliens. The dances were held in secret since some people might have misunderstood—already there were rumours of deaths for which the Sirians were not responsible except that the victims had been amicably disposed towards them.

For our services we were assured of our bread and butter. And I must say the aliens paid us better fees than any championship organiser ever did. What is more, they made the best audiences I ever danced for. They screeched and gurgled applause at every chassé, dancing more with excitement than we did.

If there is one thing I like almost as much as money it is applause.

I was old enough to know not to expect this state of affairs to go on for ever. Nothing good ever lasts long. We got away with it for a month before a character by the name of Cobb decided to interfere. During that month we worked like galley slaves. We toured every major ballroom in the country and quite a few overseas. We didn't mind working hard. We were being well paid for it and it does not take a very wise man to know that the only sure way of making money is to work for it.

All expenses were paid by the aliens. Most of them we had to bargain for. They figured that because they provided the transport, we were asking too much when we insisted on travelling expenses. But we managed to convince them that the fares they saved us were more than compensated for by the gut-churning experience of travelling by their method. We never did get accustomed to walking into one of their cones and immediately walking out again—in another continent.

Strangely enough, it was not the expense clause that made them cancel any further trips overseas. It seemed that certain dancers in

the countries we visited were more highly esteemed by the parasitic aliens than we were.

In fact, when this Cobb person showed up, we had not been asked to perform anywhere for the past three days and we were decidedly worried about it. The aliens told us straight: we were not good enough, there were better dancers elsewhere and rather than put up with our dull offering they were transporting themselves to wherever these other dancers performed.

Madge and I were in our studio, brushing up our technique, when the door was opened without a preliminary knock and a big ugly type who looked like a first cousin to Lemuel H. Caution strode straight across to the tape-deck and killed the rhythmic beat of the Sylvester quickstep. He made me so damned mad I fluffed a double-lock and caught my shoe under the cuff of my pinstripes.

"Bobby Roper and Madge Temple," he said. Usually when somebody calls our names it sounds like a fanfare and a signal for spontaneous applause. The way Cobb said them was like a judge leading up to the passing of a death sentence.

"You've been dancing for the enemy," he said, and I wasn't quite so worried. We had expected this. Sooner or later somebody with morals was bound to turn up and make a few uncomplimentary remarks. So far, we had suffered the finger of scorn at a distance only. But I was fully prepared for somebody getting over-enthusiastic and playing the role of hero.

I showed him the business end of my Biretta.

He was unconcerned. When I looked across to the doorway, I realised why. He had two friends and their guns were a lot bigger than mine. They held them a lot steadier too. I slid mine back into its pocket.

"What do you want?" I asked. Somehow the righteous indignation got lost in my throat and the question came out in a foolish squeak.

"How does it feel to be out in the cold? Not so good, is it? Your old audience is too busy fighting the enemy to bother with you and your new audience thinks you stink."

There are times when you do not argue, for the simple reason that your protagonist is talking with the conviction of sure and certain knowledge. I could see no future in denying Cobb's statement. I could also see that I was faced with somebody far more dangerous than a self-appointed patriot. I was content for the moment to leave the ball at his feet.

"So the great Bobby Roper is out of work," he sneered.

"There's justice for you. You thought you were too good for your own kind but it turns out you're not even good enough for a bunch of boss-eyed Sirians!"

That was too much. I spluttered, "Not good enough! Three times holder of the world title, a score of home and overseas championships and you say I'm not good enough!"

I was pushed in the chest until a chair hit the back of my knees and folded them.

"Wake up, Roper. You're living in the past. Your titles aren't worth a thing. There can't be a world champion when the world isn't ours any more. There are only two titles that count any more—patriot or collaborator."

Madge piped up. "I don't see that we did any harm. We didn't help them in any way."

Cobb said a strange thing. "That may be truer than you think." From the quiet way he said it, I got the impression that it was an aside to himself. He went on, "You certainly didn't do anything to make life more difficult for them."

"We're civilians," Madge said. "Why should we do the army's work?"

"That's right," Cobb lashed at her. "Why should you? Let everybody else do it, let everybody else do the sniping, the slitting of throats, the blowing up of alien barracks—while you get fat off their sweat."

I bounced off the chair, livid with indignation. I poked him in the chest. "You've got it all wrong. It's like Madge says, maybe we didn't go against them but neither did we help them. And as for anything we got out of it, that came from them and not from pious snipers and throat-slitters."

This time I was rammed into the chair most urgently. Cobb slid one over for himself and straddled it backwards.

"It's unbelievable," he said. "I just can't believe that anybody could be so much out of touch. Hell, man, don't you realise that for the past six weeks we've been living in subjugation? The aliens tell us when we may eat and how much we may eat. They tell us what we must work at and for how long—generally very long. The slightest open resistance is slapped down, instant death is the penalty—"

"—which shows how foolish it is to resist," I got in.

"You wouldn't understand it, but most people feel differently. They liked things the way they were before the Sirians came. And they are prepared to fight for their beliefs."

"For every hour of work they do for the aliens they do two hours work against them. If they are caught they get killed. If they don't get caught they live another day to provide the necessities and the luxuries which the Sirians claim as their right—the same luxuries which were passed on to you and which you think the Sirians provided from their own purse!"

From one source or another I had heard the same sort of talk before. I still thought most of it was bilge. I said so, and added, "You didn't come here just to deliver a lecture. When do we get to the real reason for your visit?"

The look he gave me was still ninety-nine per cent. the one you reserve for things found under stones. But right then I detected an odd one per cent. of pity.

"My name is Cobb," he said, making it sound very official. "Organised individual government in separate countries disappeared six weeks ago. Out of the bits and pieces a new outfit was scratched together. You could call it a world government if a tag is needed. I represent that outfit."

I had been right in my guess; he was a whole lot more than a man-to-man quarrel picker. "You look the part," I said.

"Thank you."

"It wasn't meant as a compliment."

"I know. I just thought you wanted to keep it flippant."

He had me scared. It was impossible to ruffle him. I asked, "What is it, a recruiting campaign? If so, you can include me out. I'm not healthy." That was a mistake, a silly thing to say; it simply screamed for a withering comment. But he passed it up.

"Recruiting is the word," he said. "All over the world we're calling in the best dancers—that's right, I said the best. Not all of the dancers being chosen are the absolute best in their particular art, but all of them did what you did, they danced for the aliens too soon. If you're as good as you say, you should stand a good chance."

"A good chance of what?"

"Of living."

The pity in his eyes went up another two per cent. I glanced at Madge. She looked as scared as I felt. She also looked as if she thought I was a louse and I guessed she was thinking I wasn't doing much to flatten the opposition. Sometimes I wish we didn't live together. Always I'm glad we never made it legal. Madge can be vicious.

I tried to show her I wasn't all mouse. "Look here, Cobb," I

said. "This is my private domain. If you're quite finished, get out. If not, say your piece and then get out. And don't come back. The door will be locked."

The pity left Cobb's face completely. "All right," he said, soft and smooth and with great pleasure. "All right, Roper. Here's what I want you to do: I want you to dance just once more for the Sirians. Only, this time it will be a real competition. You'll be dancing against all the other good dancers I told you about. We've fixed it for the twentieth—that gives you four days to practise."

Native instinct made my first question: "How much do we get paid? What's the fee?"

"The fee? I told you. For the winners, life. For the losers, death."

"Stop kidding. How do we get paid?"

"You heard. The twentieth is going to be a great night. There won't be a major city in the entire world without a dancing contest that night. We made a deal with the Sirians. They liked it. At first they were suspicious but when we said we were willing for all losers to be placed at their disposal, that appealed to their sadistic minds. I wasn't kidding, Roper, I was serious. *Dead serious.*"

"That's murder!"

"What are you worried about? Three times world champion, didn't you say?"

"Count me out! I'm not risking my neck."

"In that case——" Cobb signalled his silent henchmen. They raised the sights of their guns. "In that case you can have it now."

"Bobby!" Madge yelled.

I stood up. "Now wait a minute. Let's not be hasty. Tell me more and well, maybe I'll change my mind."

Before he got to the part that concerned me personally, Cobb insisted on a preamble which covered the events of the past six weeks. I wasn't greatly interested in any of it but I was struck by the amazing amount of co-operation between nations which had been achieved. Cobb's organisation had been born almost at the instant the aliens landed and took over. And in the short space of six weeks Cobb and others like him had gathered a remarkably complete dossier of facts about the aliens.

The invasion had been planned to perfection. Units of a thousand Sirians had dropped into every city on Earth which had a population over fifty thousand. The landings had been simul-

taneous. In the smaller cities, the mere presence of the invaders had been sufficient to ensure immediate take-over. In the bigger places, a few hours of ruthless, random slaughter had produced the right frame of mind for surrender—and, Cobb had said, the same ruthlessness gave birth to a determination in most people to make life hell for the aliens.

I wanted to point out the wisdom of never fighting anyone bigger than yourself. But I think I did the right thing in holding my peace.

The fact that seemed to annoy Cobb most was the senselessness of the invasion. Earth had nothing to offer the Sirians. Anything we had, they had doubly. Every fact collected since their arrival—their cruelty, their ruthlessness, their addiction to forms of entertainment which whetted their taste for excitement—everything arrowed the same conclusion: the Sirians were emotionally unstable.

That was one item which did interest me, or at least my sense of history. I said, "You mean like the Romans long ago with their gladiator fights?"

Cobb gave me a funny look. "Something like that," he agreed. "They've made the mistake of getting over-civilised. Decadent is the word. We think they came here for nothing more than the hell of it. Just for the kicks."

I shrugged. "So it was our bad luck they picked on Earth."

"Your bad luck," Cobb amended, and I felt the chill of fear again. "They want kicks and we are going to supply them."

"With dancing contests?"

"Why not? Dancing is the thing that stimulates them most. Four days from now we'll give them enough stimulation to kill them!"

"Suppose they don't come? You said yourself I was out of favour."

"They'll come." Cobb sounded very sure. "We made a deal with them——"

That was cool! "You what?" I said. "And you had the nerve to bawl me out for the same thing!"

Cobb was immune to the bite in my words. "This deal was different. We wanted to make sure that every single Sirian would be at the appointed places at the same time. Four days from now they will be congregated in thousands of different halls and ball-rooms. Some places it will be night, some it will be day. But at one prearranged moment the entertainment will commence every-

where—we have to be sure one unit doesn't realise what is happening in time to warn the others."

His last sentence went over my head. Before I could ask for enlightenment, he drove it clean out of my mind when he said, "The bait, the security for their attendance, was your life!"

Just for one brief second I had the wild notion of using my feet, first to kill him and then to escape to some place where there are no Cobbs. I knew I could have beaten him for speed. But I didn't think I could kick faster than a gun could shoot—and there were two guns trained on me.

I had to be content with words. I went through the entire alphabet of invective, not caring about Madge's feminine presence. In one long breath, I told Cobb exactly what I thought about him and his organisation and their tactics.

Confidence was my keynote as I wound up, "You've got me, Cobb. I can't stop you throwing me to the lions. But I'm not dead yet, not by a furlong! Give us the four days to practise and it won't be Madge and I who lose the contest. At our peak there isn't a couple in the world can beat us at ballroom dancing."

Cobb shook his head. "It amazes me how a bumptious type like you has got through life without being slapped down. But I guess this slap will make up for all the ones you've missed. You see, Roper, it isn't as simple as you think. We had to prevent the possibility of the Sirians favouring one venue to another. The only way to do that was to mix the contestants so that roughly the same programme would be put on everywhere."

His eyes went cold. "You'd better practise awfully hard. The dancers who excite the Sirians most are the ones who will live. And you're going to be competing against tribal dancers from Africa, clog-dancers from Holland, Scotsmen doing wild highland reels, Burmese temple dancers, Ukrainians—you think of the most exciting dancers in the world and you've got a picture of your opposition."

Even when the prize is only money you get types who will stoop to all sorts of trickery to make sure of winning. With the stakes as high as they were, I was prepared for anything. Until thirty minutes before our turn, I kept our wardrobe in our travelling cases. I had been caught too often in the past with shreds of irritating glass wool inside my shirt, sown-up coat tails, grit inside my shoes and low friction polish on the soles.

We had been placed a long way down the programme. We

took advantage of this piece of luck by standing at one corner of the ballroom, cases safely in our hands, and watching for the mistakes our competitors made.

The Scots and the Dutch made the same error. Instead of letting rip with their dances in their original peasant form, they used precise formalised versions. The result was that the aliens raised very little steam. One or two of the younger ones got out of their seats, whooped until they got black in the face and passed out from sheer excitement. But on the whole they were unimpressed.

It was a different story when the Zulus took the floor and gave the aliens a twenty minute digest of a hunting dance. It was hard to tell who yelled most, the Zulus or the Sirians. This time there wasn't an alien phlegmatic enough to remain seated. They were jumping and screaming fit to give themselves an embolism. When the dance was finished, fully a third of the aliens lay inert on the floor where they had collapsed. I could see what Cobb had meant when he said they were emotionally unstable. I could also see that the Scots and the Dutchmen were certain candidates for the executioner—and that unless Madge and I could pull out something special we were due for the same chopper.

Time passed quickly. Team after team took the floor and it got nearer our turn. Apart from the Zulus, nothing I saw worried me. The aliens' reactions, or lack of reactions, bore out my assessment. During one act they actually hissed derision. To an artist like myself, the Burmese temple dance was sheer poetry; but it nearly drove the Sirians to sleep.

We missed the next act while we got dressed. Judging by the gloomy expressions and agitated discussion as we passed the Spanish team, their act had been good—only, the Zulus had been better.

Then the band changed instruments, the drummer kicked out a solid four and we were on.

Madge was rigid and stiff as a corpse in our first spin. I hissed in her ear, told her to relax and to show a few teeth. We went straight up the floor in a series of reverse turns that would have had any human audience cheering. The Sirians were unmoved, and as we turned at the top of the floor I gave the bandleader a signal to step up the tempo.

We had been in the ballroom business long enough to know that while precisely executed steps earned the marks, it was the easier but more spectacular moves that won the crowd's applause. So we went into a routine that was pathetic in its corniness.

After a natural turn at the top of the floor we did the first two

steps of the zig-zag and this led naturally into a series of backward locks. Coming up to the other end, we did one of our specialities. We took the corner with a reverse pivot, followed by a running right turn. I decided we might as well pile on the fancy stuff and led Madge into a couple of fishtails and a series of quick runs that made us seem to float about six inches above the floor.

Any human audience would have yelled itself hoarse at this routine. The aliens showed signs of beginning to get the message, but not enough for my liking. I gave the bandleader another signal. There was only one thing for it. We abandoned our years of training and gave the Sirians jive.

We really let go. We made it as crude as could be. Madge's dress suffered a dozen rips. The starch in my shirt was a sticky sweat-sodden goo. But we got the desired result. We had the aliens rooting and jigging with excitement. Taking as a criterion the number of them who collapsed, we beat the Zulus hollow. I figured our necks were safe.

The next team was the last on the programme. We stood in our corner, catching our breath and grinning delight to each other. We didn't take much interest as the new batch of musicians climbed the platform except to notice that they were dressed in loose shirts and baggy pants of bright and shiny hue.

But when one of the bandmen clashed a pair of cymbals and the dance troupe suddenly filled the floor with a dizzy, noisy, wild gyration—I felt sick. When Cobb had mentioned there would be a team of Ukrainian dancers, it didn't register. I forgot about the Gopak.

Have you ever seen a Ukrainian Gopak? It is a folkdance, so folksy it reeks of the primitive. There are both men and women in the team. The dance represents the efforts of the men to win the girls of their favour. After an opening concerted display, it develops into a series of tours-de-force as the men take it in turn to show off.

And how those peasants can show off! They nearly kill themselves with spectacular leaps and spins and leg contortions. I have to admit it—there is nothing in the dance catalogue one half as exciting as the Gopak.

The aliens responded as I feared. The excitement infected them so much that they were collapsing like skittle pins. I didn't want to wait for their verdict.

I tugged Madge's sleeve and nodded over my shoulder. But we hadn't taken more than two steps in the direction of the exit

when Cobb and his men appeared like demon kings in our path. I shut my eyes for the rest of the Ukrainian item.

Suddenly there was silence, complete and utter silence. I blinked and saw that Cobb had stopped the proceedings. The Gopak dancers had stopped dancing, the band had stopped playing, and the seats around the ballroom were empty.

All around the perimeter of the room, inert Sirians littered the floor like apples under a tree.

Cobb stood back and cleared our passage.

"Scram," he invited. I was so busy looking for the catch that I took a moment to realise he meant it.

"We won?" I asked.

"Like hell you did! If it wasn't for the Ukrainians that death penalty would really have been carried out. And I would have had to find some other way of entertaining the aliens. Go away, Roper, crawl back under your stone. You make me sick."

Words are easy to take. I linked arms with Madge and we marched out of the hall with our reputation unsullied. Cobb didn't fool me. We must have won all right. He wasn't the type to let us go free just out of his big kind heart. But he would have cut his throat rather than admit we had won.

He was a little man—he must have been, because I've sent umpteen letters to the Government addressed to him without as much as an acknowledgment for any of them.

Since the alien scare died overnight—didn't I say all along it would?—it has been difficult to find anyone who wants to watch Bobby Roper and Madge Temple dance. The situation is getting serious for us.

That is why I want to get hold of Cobb. We never did get paid for our work that night.

ROBERT PRESSLIE



Threshold

*He was the first of all the pioneers and in his mind
lay the dream towards which all the rest would strive*

Night lay heavily upon the land, and the wind was cold. It was a wind that spoke of ice and snow and darkness and death, and it came from the North like a mighty despair. It was a wind to fear.

Urgar pulled the evil-smelling hide more closely around him, shivering at the very sound of that awful wind as it stripped the warmth from every corner of the cave. Why he had ever wandered from the tribe was a mystery even to him, but there could be no thought of ever returning. He had covered many miles since that day, many wild, lost miles over the mountains and around the forests in his search for mystery and experience. Time, too, was against his going back. Many times had the restless moon spilled the skies with silver since his departure, and his people would be complete again, after the gap caused by his absence; he could never return as an alien.

In his mind, however, hope for the future was stronger than regret for the past. Urgar fully believed that he was on the threshold of great things.

Tomorrow, he hoped, he would be in the land of the Sun-God, the golden plain of morning and warmth. Often, when the mighty Sun-God patrolled the lesser skies, Urgar had longed to journey to the great one's kingdom, and see the mighty giant arise from his

sleeping place to open eyes of light to the world. Longed, but feared. It was said the guardians of the Sun-God's kingdom were ferocious beyond imagination, and no man had ever wandered far from his tribe. Perhaps the bright-coloured stones slung by his side would pay for the privilege of trespassing on the Sun.

Sighing, Urgan turned on his side and sought the warmth of sleep. Already, the elusive visions had started in his mind; the unreal and yet meaningful shapes and fancies which had flitted across his screen of consciousness for as long as he could remember. Sometimes, Urgan's dreams were simply reflections of his waking life—the terrors and violence of his day-to-day existence. But others of his dreams were beckoning visions from the realms of fantasy, unfamiliar voices from the unknown, for ever driving the mighty hunter farther from his people, searching, seeking for what he knew not.

Morning came and Urgan arose and ate the last of the carcass he had obtained the previous day. Later, he decided, he would go down into the thickly wooded valley in search of more sustenance. It was still cold, and he wished he could cover more of his body without impeding the use of his limbs. Perhaps, with more hide, he could fashion garments for his limbs as well as his torso, securing them with gut or dried fronds. This idea he shelved, and began to clamber over some rocks to where a tiny stream burred from its outlet among a nest of ferns. Kneeling, he cupped his hairy hands and drank of the crystal water, splashing his face to drive away the sleep which still clung to him.

Looking towards the Sun-God, swimming in its low ark in the south, Urgan was disappointed to note that he seemed no nearer to the golden plain. Perhaps the Sun-God was resenting his proximity, moving his territories farther and farther away from the intruder. Urgan decided to leave his intended trespass until he was better equipped to battle with the guardians of the Sun-God's kingdom. His club was a small and useless weapon against anything more powerful than the timid deer, his chief prey. He would have to find something harder, easier to wield. Although Urgan did not realise it yet, he was wearying for the company of his own kind, and just a little afraid of the mysteries of the unknown world in which he found himself.

Then he was away again, wandering aimlessly through the maturing day.

As evening purpled the distance and veiled the sky with crimson, Urgan emerged from the forest gloom, onto a vast plain of strewn

rock. Some clumps of sparse vegetation dotted the uneven terrain which stretched far ahead to the low-lying hills. His stomach aching and his club unused, he vainly surveyed the area for some sign of life. It seemed to be utterly deserted of game, and Urgar felt the emptiness within him deepen with hopelessness and hunger. Then, suddenly, something caught his eye. A small, dark blot on the farther side of the plain was moving slowly, making its way to the slopes of the rocky hills. For the first time, Urgar detected a faint spoor as the wind drove past him. *People!*

Urgar felt a stirring within him. He knew now how lonely he had become. But they could not possibly be his people, now miles away in their search for more fertile climes. He had known that other tribes existed in the valleys between the great ranges, but contact had been unthinkable, except for plundering parties. In spite of this, the thought of food and shelter took hold of him and drove out the habit-pattern from his mind. Lately he had learned to adapt, to improvise, to pioneer. His freedom from the rigidly enforced tribal customs had opened up great new areas of his mind. Perhaps contact was possible. At least he could try.

The Sun-God had travelled twice over its terrain before Urgar could seek out and draw near to the small tribe. He had been fortunate in slaying a couple of small creatures, which, though unfamiliar, had sustained him. The pangs of hunger were returning, though, and Urgar was feeling the need for sleep. Rest periods had been few and short, for the intervening distance had been considerable, and the going heavy. But, tired though he was, Urgar dared not sleep. His hiding place was behind a slight rise of rubble, skirted with withering gorse, and only a stone's throw distant from the little encampment.

The means by which to contact the strangers was still unconsidered in Urgar's mind. Not capable of deep thought, he solved his problem on the spot, with only a glimmer of prior reasoning. But his memory was good, and formed the basis of his actions. Once he made a mistake, or discovered an advantage, he would not forget it.

A noise, shortly to his right, spun Urgar's head. Just a few feet away, two shadowy figures were creeping between some boulders, moving with obvious caution. At first, Urgar assumed that they were sentries from the encampment, intent on capturing him. But he soon saw that their caution was for the benefit of the tribe and not for him. Behind them, he made out some more figures, crouching in the darkness, obviously awaiting a signal from the leading pair.

Urgar knew instantly their business—he had been on plundering parties himself. They were about to descend upon the small camp, to plunder food and perhaps females.

He tensed, his muscles bunching and hardening enormously as he watched. Soon the figures had detached themselves from the shadows and were beginning to crawl towards the camp. There were seven of them—not many, compared with the numbers of the tribe, but each was a hunter, an experienced fighter, as Urgar had discovered, while the tribe numbered many women and children and old ones among them.

By the time Urgar had moved out from his hiding-place, the attackers had overcome two sentries and were already racing into the camp. Most of the group were still asleep, and the few who remained awake were taken completely by surprise. The seven raiders would soon have grabbed what they wanted and disappeared into the gloom of the trees beyond. Urgar acted quickly. Leaving his club behind he untied the pouch of yellow stones by his side, originally intended as a gift for the Sun-God. The night-wind rushed at him as he swooped down the slope, uttering the fearful war cry taught him by his father. The raiders froze in their tracks, not knowing how many were descending upon them.

Soon he had felled two of them, hurling the remaining stones at the retreating backs of the surviving attackers, who had evidently decided to forget their plunders and content themselves with their own skins. Soon they were lost in the night, leaving their two comrades, dead or dying, behind. The unfortunate pair were quickly and unceremoniously disposed of by the now awakened tribesmen.

Urgar stood waiting in their midst, the pride of defender upon him. Several of the warriors were advancing menacingly towards him, under the impression that he was one of the plunderers. A young female intervened, gesticulating towards Urgar and describing what had happened. The elders of the tribe approached him, a trifle warily. He stood quite still, his arms extended and palms turned outwards, the timeless sign of peace. The introduction was a short and simple affair; a mutual appraisal, a mumble, a touching of hands. Urgar was a member, a leading and proven member of the tribe.

As he sat down to eat a welcome meal, Urgar noticed that the female who had intervened on his behalf was still watching him. He felt good! He was conscious of a new thrill; the thrill of the pioneer. Only he had made contact with another tribe. He had been the first to break down the barriers of isolation. Urgar was anything but an

authority on genetics, but he was looking forward to his mating with another breed, another strain of people. The unfamiliar was always an attraction. The girl had disappeared, probably returning to continue her rudely interrupted sleep but, tomorrow.

It was with sadness that Urgan remembered the yellow stones, now lost and scattered among the rubble. His mind became filled with incredible tragedy. What a gift they would have made for a mate! Bright and shining and so unusual! Was there nothing else? Something bright, eye-catching.

Urgan raised his eyes. Overhead, the stars had appeared, pristine, appealing things in the night. They seemed to beckon him, challenge him. Could he not. ?

Urgan was the mightiest of all living things. Nothing surely, was beyond his powers? Once more, his determination dwarfed the difficulties confronting him. What he wanted, he could get.

At least, he could try.

He started to move out of the camp, heedless of the curious stares of his new comrades. Slowly, he walked up the hillside, until he entered the sprawling forest which covered the lower slopes. In the darkness and silence of the primal trees, Urgan felt excitement throb within him. Something in his mind that had not been there before, except as a dream of mist, drove him on, urging him with inexorable, inevitable demands.

All the terror and the tenderness, all the hope and heartbreak that was his life blended into savage joy. And like a tide, the joy ebbed to wistfulness, surging again to raging exhilaration.

Urgan began to climb a tree.

He was breathless when he emerged at the top, high above the land. The world was an impressive sight from this height, but Urgan's gaze was upward, outward.

The stars gazed down upon him like a million eager eyes, or a million hopeful years. They shone in endless silence, promising, daring, tantalising. So bright, so wonderful, so far away.

Angrily, desperately, for his longing had increased out of all proportion to his object, Urgan stretched as far as he dared on the topmost branches of the tree. His massive hand was extended into the night, groping, probing.

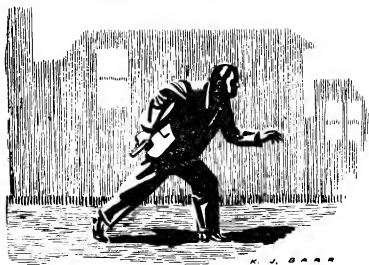
The great and endless struggle was beginning; the struggle, which, in a million years, would still be only a beginning.

Feebly, tentatively, man was reaching for the stars.

JAMES INGLIS



KENNETH BULMER



Wisdom of the Gods

A vast store of alien knowledge now festered in his brain. Could he, under any circumstances, be responsible for unleashing it upon the world?

Illustrations by Kenneth Barr

SYNOPSIS OF PARTS ONE AND TWO

Two hundred and fifty million years ago—give or take ten million—a spaceship crashed upon Earth. She contained a Galactic Intelligencer, an encyclopaedia of galactic civilisation's knowledge. Over the years the spaceship vanished and the encyclopaedia was entombed in coal. Today, the Ancient Railways Preservation Society, headed by Lord Ashley (known as Jeffers) and Beagle, a nuclear physicist, and Rodney Winthrop, a mathematician, run a small rail-

way from the village of Nether Ambleton. Walter Colborne, a historian, is the stoker of its engine, the Saucy Sal. His sister, June, is undergoing surgery for cancer.

Colborne throws the encyclopaedia, along with the coal with which it was mined, on the Saucy Sal's fire. In the explosion lines of mental force radiate and implant scattered items of alien information in the minds of people on the train and in the surrounding countryside.

Sir William, head of Nuclear Intelligence department Five, sends John Roland to investigate. Tom, a tramp, has the index of the encyclopaedia. Sally Picton, a local reporter, was on the train. Neither Lord Ashley nor Beagle received any alien information.

Colborne's mind is numbed by the shock. When he at last realises he knows many facts of alien knowledge he is appalled by the understanding that he will have to spend the rest of his life answering questions. He does not pry into his mind to discover these new facts.

The Golden Lion is taken over by those investigating the occurrence and the upper room becomes Headquarters. Here Lord Ashley, Sir William and their staffs set up an Operations Room. They try to track down everyone who was on the train. There is some friction as to control between Colonel Starkie of the military and Superintendent Brown of the C.I.D.

Colborne sees a group of boys playing in the road with toy guns. One of them has adapted his toy to shoot a violet beam which kills his friends, destroys houses and sets fire to hayricks. When Colborne sees the type of information contained in the GI he resolves to wait before revealing what he knows. He pretends that his brain is still numbed.

Lord Ashley tries to convince Colborne that men ultimately benefit from fresh knowledge and inventions. Colborne understands this, but cannot agree to tell what he knows. He is suspicious that Lord Ashley has guessed that he does recall the alien information—which appears in the mind on summons—but he cannot decide to talk. He is sent to hospital with Doctor Cremieux for a check-up. On the way back a shot is fired at the ambulance from a .22 rifle in the woods.

Nether Ambleton is now filled with paratroopers and guarded, as is the nearby nuclear power station under construction at Polder. Colborne is told by Saint Angelo's hospital that his sister June is seriously ill. The newspapers carry false stories to account for the events at Nether Ambleton.

An American, Hackensack, steps off a plane from London Air-

port at Idlewild and begins to preach a new religion. He was in the line of fire from the exploding encyclopaedia and claims that he sees in letters of fire in his mind, messages that say that the gods will soon return from the sky.

A Brigadier Graham, who was on the train, now says that he has the first part of a formula for a new weapon that will make the cobalt bomb look like a Christmas cracker. Someone else has the rest of the formula.

As Colborne realises that he possesses this information, Lord Ashley produces charts of his encephalic rhythms, taken by Cremieux, and says that they now know that Colborne is in possession of a vast store of alien information.

CHAPTER TWELVE

John Roland breezed back into the Operations Room, struggling with a large chart, a set of measuring instruments and a mass of scribbling paper. He was partially blinded by his impedimenta to the grim group around the table.

"This is a new one," he called out, advancing on the table and trying to place the charts out neatly in face of his own windage. "This Hackensack feller was in an aeroplane, flying out of London airport. I've ruled off the lines, and the Engineer wallah has done all the brainwork. Things like the curvature of the Earth and all that, you know. He must have been sitting at a window right in the line of the explosion. So it carries a long way. That, at least, we know."

"We know," Lord Ashley said. He was looking at Colborne.

It was a supreme moment for Colborne.

He sat for a long moment, quite quietly, planning, weighing courses of action, detached from the immediate hurly-burly swirling in his mind. He could deny the obvious. He could agree, and give in to the pressures on him from conscience, liking, feeling of superficial duty. He could succumb to superior forces. He could try to make a run for it. He could try to convince himself that he was being needlessly dramatic about a very simple choice. If everyone else leaped at the chance of finding out what new and alien knowledge lurked in their brain, surely, as a good democrat, he should be prepared to accept the ruling of the majority? After all, his fears of becoming a sort of living but buried encyclopaedia were a little distraught, a little unbalanced. He could spend a month or two in giving up whatever information he did have, and then carry on from where he had left off. And it was a pretty sure bet if he did co-operate

that Lord Ashley could see his way clear to recommending him for that coveted job.

And, amidst all the horror and super-weaponry that he would unleash upon the world, there might also be a few crumbs of useful, peaceful knowledge.

Of course, he could go through with what he had already decided must be his course of action and take the consequences.

He could play dumb.

"I'm sorry, Jeffers," he said ingenuously. "I'm not sure I follow you. I'm no scientist, you know. Encephalic rhythms?"

Lord Ashley's nicotine-stained moustache blew out as he sighed. He put both hands flat on the table before him. "I like you, Walter. We all do. Beagle and Winnie and the rest. Funny thing is, we respect your point of view. You don't think that Beagle, for instance, likes what the military do to his beloved equations, do you? Yet he knows full well that if he doesn't do the work, work which is there for anyone with the right brains to do, then someone else will do it. And that someone might not have so tender a conscience as Beagle and our own friends. You follow?"

"I follow, Jeffers. But what's it got to do with Encephalic rhythms?"

"Just this, old son. We know you received most of that charge of knowledge from the GI. For a little we were prepared to let you go along with the story that your brain was numbed."

"But it was!"

"From birth!" put in Winthrop.

"Further proof of that came in the quick reaction from those schoolboys. Young minds received a greater impression than old; the kids, even without foreknowledge or prompting, were able to spout the stuff on TV and to make pretty toys from toy guns." Lord Ashley was still speaking gently. "But now we know that you are in possession of most of the facts. And," he smiled. "To quote a certain gentleman, we want the facts. It's no use pretending any more, Walter. This is as far as we go."

Colborne stood up. He felt sick, and his head was beginning to ache. This time it was a good old-fashioned Terrestrial ache.

"I don't really follow you, Jeffers," he said boldly. "Why should I hold back—"

"That's ruddy obvious!" Colonel Starkie spoke with contempt. "Here, let me get at him, I'll soon persuade him what's best."

"You've probably had overseas experience in persuasion, Colonel," Colborne said insultingly.

There was quietness.

Then, from some void forgotten by them all, John Roland said: "This guy, he was in an aeroplane and he received a charge. Got religion——"

"In a minute, John," Sir William said testily.

"I think," Colborne said, "it would pay you all more to discuss this man Hackensack than myself. After all, this proves that more people have received a charge of knowledge than we at first thought. You didn't have to be on the train."

"That's right," Roland said, cocking an eye at Sir William. "I've already got Harrison working on an extension of the explosion path clear across to the coast."

"Very good work, John," Lord Ashley said, not taking his old eyes from Colborne's face. "We must certainly look into it. Very certainly."

It was painfully obvious that no-one was paying any attention to his words. Everything seemed to be hanging on the clash of wills, the barriers to be sundered, the atmosphere of strain between Lord Ashley and Colborne.

Colborne felt a heel. He struggled angrily with himself. It was his life, his brain, his decision, wasn't it? He didn't owe this sacrifice to anyone, did he? Of course not. He wasn't a hidebound old has-been like Brigadier Graham, living in the past. Although, come to think of it, he'd been approaching perilously close to that foetal stagnation. But his own interest in the past stemmed from the desire to study it in order to steer a course through the coming days; not so that he could wallow in nostalgic remembrances of better days of youth. And he wasn't a dedicated fanatic to the cause of science, willing to smash any and everything of worldly value and human comfort just so that another little chink of knowledge could be filled in. Facing this central problem as squarely as he could, Colborne felt absolutely convinced that what he had decided was right. He had weighed the advantages and the disadvantages of allowing whatever information he had acquired to be broadcast to the scientific world, and the scales had fallen decisively upon the side of disadvantage. That had been painfully obvious. Good Lord! Two men dead. Another insane. Children and the work of centuries whiffed into nothing. The creeping terror that there might be a killer crawling in anyone's mind. And now, the final proof.

They were all eager, panting with lust, to find out how to work the latest horror weapon; a weapon that could turn the planet into a puddle of liquid mud, could whisk into nonexistence the entire

population of the globe. And even Colborne's cynicism of the worth of the majority of the present inhabitants of the Earth, of their merits and claims to go on living, shrivelled before the stark realisation that in his hands reposed the means whereby that life could be curtailed. However black you painted humanity, there was always a reason to go on living, something which, although perhaps not quite understood, was yet potent enough to make every single man and woman strive for life. Even those poor sufferers who, in sliding into oblivion, would at least free themselves from the tortures of diseases—even those pitiful wretches struggled to continue living.

He knew that, didn't he? Young June—she was being eaten up by cancer—and yet she still smiled and persevered, unwilling just tamely to lie back and die.

And these blood-hungry ghouls expected him to hand them the final details of this weapon that could slaughter every single sentient being on the planet?

They were the madmen, not he.

Lord Ashley tapped the charts gently. "These don't lie, Walter. They tell us all, quite plainly, that you have embedded in your brain most of the available information that came from the egg of knowledge. We know that children reacted quickly to the stimulus, and that those with deadly knowledge succumbed to whatever horror it was they held early, and we know that there are varying degrees of acceptance of the alien information. We agree that your brain was numbed by the sudden severe shock. But not any more, Walter, not any more."

"Who knows what marvels may lie in your mind, Walter," Beagle said eagerly. "Think of the wonders that may accrue to humanity; knowledge of himself, travel to other planets, control of nature, harnessing of vast cosmic forces——"

"So you read the Sunday Supplements, too, eh, Beagle?"

"Now look here, Walter," Winthrop said, jutting out his revoltingly shirted stomach.

"I'm sorry. I'm a little distraught." Colborne punched Beagle lightly on the biceps. "Lord knows I share your dreams of a better future for humanity, and by that I don't mean bigger TV screens and better detergents and ladder-proof nylons. It's difficult to phrase exactly what I mean; but however good science is, however much benefit it brings us all in material things, if it runs away with our consciences and chains us to a wheel of progress merely for the sake of progress, then we're going to be the losers."

"There's nothing new in that, Walter."

"I know, Jeffers. But it applies with greater force just now than ever before in the history of mankind."

Lord Ashley rustled the charts again. Quite quietly, he said: "What it amounts to, Walter, is that you don't trust us. You believe that you alone can decide the future of humanity." He looked directly and uncompromisingly at Colborne. "Don't you think you are taking rather a lot of other people's responsibilities on your shoulders?"

Colborne shook his head. "If I was deliberately keeping back valuable scientific information on that account, you'd have a valid case. But I keep telling you. I just don't have the information."

Winthrop exploded. He seized the charts from the table, tearing a corner off under Lord Ashley's pressing fingers, and thrust them, all flapping and crumpled, into Colborne's face. Winthrop was shaking with anger, purple of face, fairly dancing in impotent fury.

"But you damn well do have it, Walter! It's all here! I just cannot understand you. Talk about dog in the manger—Walter, you disgust me! You make me sick!"

"Winny——" Colborne appealed. It is never pleasant when a man's friends turn against him. When he is unsure of his position, and yet must go on defending it against logic, bolstering his decision by his own intuitive feeling of right and wrong, the situation becomes intolerable. Colborne felt awful.

He said: "Look—maybe these scientific hen-tracks do mean that I've got the damned information in my mind. So okay! But they don't mean that I know it, do they? My brain was numbed when the coal exploded—I was nearly off my rocker. You all know that. I was in a state of shock. And when I came round I still felt muzzy—I still do. So it can only be that although the stuff is there all right, I can't get at it. Surely you understand that?"

Lord Ashley walked a few paces away, turned uncertainly, stood leaning over, scrutinising Colborne. Beagle's long yellow face was mournful, as though set in yellow wax and then squeezed in and down. Winthrop stood back, and then quietly laid the papers back on the table. There was a silence.

"*By God!*" thought Colborne in surprised pleasure. "*I'm going to get away with it!*"

"Are you, Walter, prepared to take your oath on that?" Lord Ashley spoke with calm assurance.

"*Here goes!*" thought Colborne. "*Perjury yet.*"

But it was only for a short time, until he had had a breathing

space to puzzle the whole thing out. He hadn't dared admit that he knew anything; to do that would have opened the floodgate, and in the spillout would have rushed the rest of the hell-formulae for the weapon. It was better—it would just blasted-well have to be better—this way. He took a deep breath, standing erect and outwardly calm but inwardly a mass of seething revolt.

"I don't know, yet, Jeffers," he said firmly. "You have my word—for what it's worth—on that."

To himself, from now on, his word would mean as much as that of a land-hungry dictator.

Lord Ashley blew out his nicotine-stained moustache. Beagle sighed as though told that Isaac Newton had repealed the law of gravity. Winthrop grunted, and shifted uncomfortably.

They all began to speak at once.

Lord Ashley persevered, and Colborne heard him saying: "As that's the case, Walter—well, you have our apologies, of course. Forgive us if we smack too heavily of bloodhounds on the trail; but it does mean a very great deal." He thought about that, and laughed shortly. "And that's bowdlerisation on a grand scale."

"But Walter does still have it," Beagle pointed out eagerly. "He'll be bound to remember soon. And then we can really go to work."

"Don't be too long about it, Walter," said Winthrop. He coughed. "And I'm sorry if I blew my top. As Jeffers says, this thing is so big it scares me. If you follow."

"I do." Colborne wished desperately to change the subject to get away from this dangerous ground. "As soon as I have a glimmering, I'll let you know. But hadn't we better find out from John more about this Hackensack fellow?"

John Roland had kept discreetly in the background during the mounting tension between the three aggressors and the lone defender; now, with the bubble of antagonism broken, he stepped forward again, laying his own chart across the creased and torn chart with which Lord Ashley had hoped to clinch his argument.

Colonel Starkie pushed himself importantly forward. He pointedly ignored Colborne. Half turning his back upon him, the colonel began to expound the measures taken to round up everyone who might have received a charge of mental dynamite from the exploding coal. Every now and then John Roland would tactfully correct the gallant soldier on a matter of fact. Reluctantly at first, and then with greater absorption, the others went into details and plans, their minds and direction of thought only gradually leaving

the irritating problem of Colborne and his stubborn refusal to co-operate. The air grew blue with tobacco smoke and messengers doubled in and out; the telephone was in constant use.

They ate working, snatching a hasty mouthful between taking a report and issuing orders. Sleep was a word that you might find in a dictionary; it had no meaning.

John Roland had hunted up a twenty-year-old edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and had distributed the various volumes among his personnel. Each man or woman was painstakingly checking the entries of their particular volume with a person who had been on the Saucy Sal run on the day of the explosion. Results were meagre at first; but as information was pooled, integrated and then re-issued, fresh knowledge came to light. It was like the slow growth of a tree. The local radio and bicycle shop had been raided and every available tape recorder had been commandeered. The entire stock of tapes was filled with the pleasant country burr of the local residents, and presently, Sir William had crates of new tapes flown in direct from the factory in North London.

A complex filing system arrived, equipped with an efficient corps of WRACS, and was installed in the village hall. Steel helmeted troops mounted guard. The local Boy Scouts acted as willing messengers, carrying tapes as though their Queen's Scout Badge depended on safe arrival, and demanding—and obtaining—signatures for receipt with adamant politeness.

Walter Colborne found a corner window seat and hunched down, hands in pockets, seeing all the rush and bustle, and yet cut off from it as though armour-glass stood between him and the rest of the Operations Room.

The sight of this ordered efficiency, amateur and full of mistakes though it was, frightened him. He saw in it a clear indication of what lay in store for him in the future. If the authorities were taking this trouble and time over extracting the snippets of alien knowledge in the minds of people who, for instance, had been sitting in the last carriages of the train, if they were as deadly serious as this over the fringe people—what sort of organisation would they set up to deal with him? He had a horrified vision of himself, surrounded by implacable men and women and insensate, avid machines, spending the rest of his life answering questions.

He was saved from a minor brain storm by the arrival of Sally Picton. She walked in, with a smile for her soldier escort, and stood, poised at the far end of the room, looking about her. She was tired

and drawn, her face pale, and her eyes seemed to have shrunk into violet pockets of bruised flesh. Colborne experienced a not unpleasant stab of protective pity for her—and then dismissed the idea of pitying Sally Picton as sheer patronising blimpishness.

Whatever happened, Sally was still tough enough as a person to take care of herself; Colborne was by this time well aware of that streak of stubborn obduracy in her that he felt would overcome any obstacles in her path. She would handle her questioners with firmness and tact, and get a good night's sleep afterwards. He stood up and walked towards her.

As soon as she saw him, she smiled.

"Have you remembered yet, Walter?"

He was surprised not at her tone—which was light and conversational—but at her question.

"Not yet. Have you?"

She hesitated. Then: "No. But I expect I shall soon."

She did not give Colborne time to think what this evasion meant, beyond a quick understanding that perhaps Sally, too, for all her outer toughness, did not relish the idea of spending days answering questions and that her denial bolstered his own position. She went on: "I've been over to the hospital. The vicar has opened the church. Two or three children hurt when that filthy violet beam cut down the houses. It must have been a terrible shock."

"It was."

"I'm tired." She stretched her arms out, smiling apologetically. "Think I'll catch a little fresh air and then turn in. I've been given a room with a Mrs. Champion. A real dear. Doesn't understand a thing that's going on and swears 'it's them Germans again.'"

"Education's a wonderful thing," Colborne said. "The chap I'm staying with considers the whole affair an outrage. The local cricket fixture list has gone to pot. Nether Ambleton were playing their hated rivals, Larks something-or-other this week-end. Local derby. He says it's a slur on Nether Ambleton's honour and they'll never live it down. Says the other side will claim it was all a trick to avoid their new seam bowler who apparently took seven for twelve the other week and has scared every village cricket team for miles around."

Sally laughed. "I know." Her laugh had no humour in it; it was more a sound of despair, the sound a person makes who is coming to the end of their tether. "Our opening bat will be going to the funeral of his boy. I should imagine he'd see a violet ray coming towards him instead of a cricket ball."

Colborne nodded. "I expect he'd like to smash at that with a straight bat, instead of playing the ball——" he said, and stopped, trying to keep his expression calm and unchanged, but had to turn away hurriedly and pretend to cough.

As he had allowed his own hatred of the weapon to flow from his mind an image had arisen, unbidden, an image of a piece of equipment—the functioning of which he could see also as a page of formulæ—a piece of equipment which could generate a field that would stop absolutely the deadly violet beam.

"Are you all right, Walter."

"Yes. Yes, thanks. Just tired." His mind was seething.

"Come and breathe some fresh air. Clean your lungs out. And then you'd better turn in."

"All right." He followed Sally out of the room and down the stairs. He supposed that her escort would be somewhere about. But all his attention was concentrated on what he had discovered—he, Walter Colborne—possessed the secret of the device to stop the violet beam weapon.

He could give the world the antidote, could prevent a recurrence of the tragedy that had killed children and bereaved parents. And yet the Pandora's Box Effect, the giving of one piece of information bringing in its train all the rest, clamoured at his conscience.

A new and subtly ugly twist had been added to the cost of his silence.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Colborne saw Sally to her lodgings and then, with a brief: "Good night," began to walk back to the Golden Lion, pondering. Around him the village slumbered uneasily. It was a fine night, warm and pleasant, and even here in the narrow streets, sweet night scents of the woodlands reminded him that he was in the heart of the country. The stars were clear—fat and warm and bright.

Walking slowly along the road, with time-worn houses about him and the crooked, uneven line of rooftops rising black against the star glow above his shoulders, Colborne reflected upon his position. Sleeping somewhere in one of those ancient houses, or perhaps in a chalet up at the holiday camp, possibly just now being questioned by John Roland or one of his indefatigable staff, there might well be a man or woman who held in an uncomprehending brain the secret of travelling to those warm friendly stars above. Suppose he, him-

self, had just been a passenger on the train, instead of stoking the Saucy Sal with—as it were—the crux of the situation, and had merely received a small piece of information; say the secret of constructing a spaceship in the backyard. Would he then have been as squeamish as he now was? Colborne, walking unhurriedly, his footfalls echoing flatly on the old stones, realised that moral responsibility has nothing to do with degrees; it is a matter of kinds.

He had made up his mind quickly, almost in panic, bustled into taking up a stand that later reflection might wholly condemn. But as of now, he felt deeply that he was doing the right thing—and by right he meant what he personally considered to be best for all concerned.

He did not know how to build a spaceship with a home handyman's kit; therefore he'd best forget that idea and concentrate exclusively on working out his own problems. But, he thought, and sighed for Sally, it would have been nice

One thing was very plain. Somehow or other he had to ensure the details of the defence against the violet beam weapon falling into Lord Ashley's hands. But how to do it?

Ahead of him now was the corner where the corn chandlers leaned gently against the night air, the old shop restful and somehow conveying an air of peace and of the continuance of life in face of the worst that might befall. The sign of the Golden Lion moved lazily, squeaking like a mouse in the wainscoting, faint and far away. A breath of air passed sighing down the street. The rustle of leaves all about painted into the sounds a musical frame, a coherent pattern of night noises that had existed since men first came to these Islands.

A rifle butt thudded ringingly on stone; a harsh voice challenged. A light flared and died.

Startled, Colborne paused, and then stepped into the deeper shadows of the corn chandlers' massive doorway. Footsteps pattered along the street. They grew louder. Again, angrily, the voice challenged. The footsteps faltered, then quickened pace and now Colborne thought that he could detect another set, angling in, joining the first.

A rifle-shot slapped the night.

A new voice raised in query. A muffled answer. The sound of a car. Doors squealing.

Colborne remained in the dark doorway, perfectly happy to let the military play their footling games, content to sit back and await a return of silence and peace.

He had no idea what was going on and he did not feel at all concerned.

There was in him the detached and unreal sense of unworldliness that grips after long labour, when the brain is tired and overwrought, and which had been heightened and made to seem natural by the quietness and balm of this country village. He felt a passing anger that the spell had been broken. He supposed that this latest foolishness had to do with the rifle shot fired at the ambulance.

"Colborne!" The voice was loud, urgent, ringing through the darkness. "Colborne! Where in blazes are you?"

The voice was strange; Colborne had never heard it before, even though it was distorted by the violence of its volume. Who might be shouting for him through the shadowy streets of this village at night? A soldier, perhaps, sent out to look for him. A stern-faced military man sent to act as monitor, to make sure he did nothing foolish, as it might be phrased, a paratrooper sent to wet-nurse him because in his brain were secrets that men would sell their souls to possess?

Colborne felt his insides curl. Deliberately, he remained silent, cowering back into the doorway, determined to balk this arrogant show of authority.

Heavily booted feet clattered now on stone ahead. The second set of footsteps were lighter, quicker.

A woman, then.

Well, whoever it was, they'd have to find him. He wasn't going to make their chaperoning job any easier—and he recognised with a small sardonic corner of his mind that his attitude was that of a typical sulky child and he knew, too, that it was all a direct result of his own bone-weary fatigue. He was not in full control of himself and he doubted if he had been since the moment of the explosion.

Again the voice called. This time the words were muted, insistent, pervaded with a tense urgency.

"I know you're there, Colborne! Come on out, man!"

A torch beam sprang like a livid wire down the road. The light flickered erratically, as though held in the hand of a man running. Further voices like baying hounds carolled in the distance. The heavy footfalls ceased. The lighter steps kept on, then they too petered out. Somewhere a long way off a bell chimed.

The torch beam, jumping nearer, swept across the dark figure of a man. The radiance caught his face as he threw a desperate glance over his shoulder. Colborne saw in that flashing instant the craggy weatherbeaten face of the out-of-doorsman. He sensed that

the man's body was bulky and heavily built, and then the stranger twisted like a leaping salmon, and even as the sub-machine bullets gouged into the brick and plaster of the shop front, he vanished into the shadows. His footsteps echoed loudly between high walls; then they had gone.

Not a soldier, then! Someone else, a stranger, trying to carry out some apparently important task, and foiled in the attempt by the guards, was now running for his life through the slumbering streets of Nether Ambleton. Colborne, without stepping from the security of his doorway, shouted reassuringly.

"All right! Colborne here! He's gone away."

"Walter! Walter—are you all right?" And Sally was shaking and trembling and laughing in his arms.

He was too tired and fuzzled to question her. Guards surrounded them; a fitful moon appearing low down over the trees caught milky gleams from their rifles, their rubber-soled boots padded softly on the stones, the smell of their battle-dress was strong and coarse in his nostrils.

"Walter—I saw him creeping after you—I couldn't shout—he had a gun. Oh, Walter, thank God you're safe."

"All right, Sally," he said. "All right. It's all over now."

The soldiers made very sure that these two prize recipients of alien information were escorted safely back to the Operations Room in the upper floor of the Golden Lion. Colborne walked like a drugged man. He craved sleep as a man in the desert craves water. Lord Ashley and Beagle made hurried arrangements for Sally to have a room in the inn, and Colborne was shown a pallet on the floor. He fell onto it, all his limbs aching, his head buzzing like an ungoverned dynamo.

Sally kept on repeating her story, over and over. She was convinced that the stranger had been attempting to kill Colborne. Lord Ashley and Beagle attempted to reassure her in vain.

"You were a very brave girl to do what you did," Lord Ashley said paternally. "And also damn stupid. Why didn't you ring us—but then, you didn't—and it all came out all right in the end and it's over now."

"Although who he was and why he should try to kill Walter I can't imagine," said Beagle in an aggrieved tone.

Lying on his pallet, Colborne said vaguely: "You feel he's trying to do you out of a prize exhibit, Beagle?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that, Walter; but

"Clear out and let me get some sleep," Colborne said. "And

make damn sure that Sally has a reliable guard. Those crazy loons in the woods are dangerous."

Colborne forced himself to his feet to see Sally safely to her room, and owlishly instructed the young and pink-cheeked paratrooper on guard outside her door to shoot anyone in the guts who tried to break in—and to keep out himself, just in case. "At least, that's the general tenor of the post orders," he said, and, shaking his head, fell onto his pallet.

"He's just about all in, Jeffers," Beagle said.

"And so are we all," Lord Ashley replied severely. "Turn in, all of you—and that goes for you, too, John—we'll work better in the light of tomorrow."

"You mean today," John Roland said, smiling, and went off to his cubicle in an attic under the roof.

Quietness shrouded the Operations room. Occasionally the clumping sounds of soldiers on guard outside penetrated, and once the husky efficiency of a sergeant on relieving rounds roused Colborne from his uneasy dozing. Uneasy dozing—because for all his tiredness he could not rid his teeming mind of the guilty thoughts of the defence machine. It crouched in his brain, wrapped in its page of formulae like an evil spider peering from under a stone, its web spun before it and entrapping all rational thought.

The moon, rising, sent cold gleams across the tables with their equipment lying quiescent and somehow waiting, like actors in the wings awaiting the promptings of the author. Colborne lifted himself onto an elbow and stared through gummy eyelids. Well—it was worth the try.

He rose, and walking very quietly, crossed to the table. He carried his blanket with him. Draping the blanket about his shoulders and over his head, he worked for a few moments at the nearest tape recorder. He was recalling the tricks that can be played on tape, the subtle variations of speed that destroy any identity in a voice, the firm thumb alongside the capstan to control and distort. He pushed his handkerchief into his mouth and spoke, slowly and soggly around it. He switched on the recorder, gave it time to warm up and then enshrouded machine and microphone in the engulfing blanket. He ran a test and then played his voice back at the lowest gain that gave a hearable sound.

It sounded like a senile old granpop with no teeth and a failing memory. It did not sound like Walter Colborne.

Carefully, summoning up the alien information to hang in

figures of fire in his brain, he dictated the defence machine formulae. He made a thorough job of it. When he had finished, he reeled the tape from the machine and set it half way down the latest batch of fresh recordings.

"Now let John sort that one out," he said, and chuckled weakly, crawled into bed and fell at once into profound slumber.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was the first and only time that Colborne had ever seen John Roland flustered. That quiet, brisk, efficient man with his gift of unobtrusive pervasiveness was invariably a master of whatever situation he found himself in; at least, that was how it appeared to the envious Colborne. Winkling out the quiet men of history had always been a rewarding task, you so often stumbled across the reasons for the more flamboyant figures' actions. The comparison was ludicrous, yet Colborne could not rid his imagination of the similarity between John Roland and Fouché, Napoleon's Chief of Police. The two men were different, almost completely so—and yet there remained that inner self-contained hubris, that understanding that in their own hands rested the fate of nations.

"Don't stand there day-dreaming again, Walter!"

Colborne looked up from the charts displaying the relative positions to the Saucy Sal of her passengers, and smiled.

"Sorry, Beagle." He nodded his head towards Roland. The N.I.5 agent was sitting with friends—four telephones, two tape recorders, a mass of papers, ledgers, files, receipts, and a constant stream of harassed orderlies and messengers and chastened Boy Scouts.

"The puzzle within a puzzle," said Lord Ashley, genial as ever. "Voilà Herlock Sholmes at work!"

"Poor old John." Colborne hadn't clearly foreseen the likely reaction to his ploy in secreting the defence machine mechanism among fresh tapes recorded from the previous day's interviews. Now he felt mean. John Roland had come in for some scathing criticism from a number of people; and the experience was fresh in his life. As soon as the tape-checkers had begun work the stranger-tape had been detected. Now all hell had broken loose in an attempt to track down its maker.

It was not a logical thing to suspect Colborne. Although he had been given a temporary night's lodgings in the Operations Room

in default of any other accommodation in the Golden Lion, the place had been under stringent guard. The sleuths were seeking an elderly man, probably without teeth, who rambled in his speech. That rambling had not been noticed by Colborne in the night and he chuckled when he understood that it stemmed from his own fatigue.

Roland stood up suddenly, spilling papers in a snowy pile. "Well, I don't understand it," he said wrathfully. "There's no record shown. The tape could have been made by any one of these people. We'll have to check each one again separately. But I'll find the culprit, so help me."

"I'm sure you will—" began Lord Ashley.

Rodney Winthrop entered. He was red and fresh and newly scrubbed. His shirt would have blinded the Medusae.

"Haven't you blokes finished yet?" he called. "It's getting late—you slept all morning, sluggards. Beagle and I went to shape those figures up and then we can build the machine. I've got the kid's toy gun safely put away."

"All right, Winny," Lord Ashley said. He called across to Roland. "John, let Winny have a copy of that tape. And stop worrying who cut it. We've got the thing, that's the main item."

"And very useful it is, too," said Colborne.

They all stared at him. He was uncomfortably reminded of their stares when he had given his word. Quite suddenly, that ugly tension was back in the air.

"A little too convenient, don't you think, Walter?" Lord Ashley gestured towards Colborne's rumpled bed.

Colborne braced himself for another round of verbal battle. He had accepted this when he had cut the tape. Suspicion might, at first, not fall on him; but it could only have been a matter of time before they came to the obvious conclusion.

He smiled; but not too brightly. "I'm still feeling rotten, Jeffers," he said—and that was true, too true. Every muscle of his body ached with an individual and persistent ache. "Are you trying to suggest that I had something to do with this tape?"

"We are, Walter," said Winthrop aggressively. He hitched his shirt up and thumped the table. "I was never satisfied that you didn't recall what the GI gave you. Now I'm almost certain that you're up to your tricks again."

"Look—all of you—I'll play ball as soon as I can. Right now I suggest we eat and simmer down." He glanced around the room. "Anybody know where Sally is?"

"She's gone off somewhere," Roland said. "If you have been monkeying with my records, Walter, I'll—"

"Just a minute, John." Lord Ashley sat quite still. But Colborne knew enough of the peer to know he was cooking up a scheme.

"Just a minute nothing!" fumed Winthrop. "We've let Walter call the tune far too long. Let me explain to him his childish behaviour, his criminal behaviour—"

Lord Ashley stood up, cutting off Winthrop. He looked keenly at Colborne, stroked his moustache, and then said: "We're all tired and hungry. Haven't eaten in years. I suggest we all have a quiet meal, and perhaps our digestions will aid our good natures."

"Me and my ulcers," someone said.

Colborne was hungry, and yet the thought of food repelled him. He went downstairs into the dining room with the others, wondering at this quick change of tempo, worried lest Lord Ashley, with all his world-wise wisdom, was working out a scheme to drop what was wanted into the outstretched hands of the scientific world. Colborne knew the wily old peer well enough for that. The desire to get away, to be apart from the wrangling and the forceful putting out of points of view overwhelmed him. He had to creep off and think quietly for himself. Doubts rose like a miasma to torture him with the fear that he was wrong, that this lonely path he had chosen was the idiot's way when all the world walked in the sunshine.

He snatched a few mouthfuls of food and then, excusing himself unintelligibly, he walked slowly towards the cloakrooms. Once out of sight of the diners, he marched briskly out the main doorway, nodded affably at the sentry, and set off down the mainstreet. He guessed he would be missed rather quickly. So long as he could find a cranny, there to curl up and brood, before the military erupted on his trail, so long, he felt, could he retain his last few shreds of composure. He had the trapped, choking feeling a man must experience in a burning building, with walls of fire on every side.

The gloomy major, Colonel Starkie's aide, ran down the street towards him. Colborne tensed himself for the encounter. The major, scarlet of face, gasped out: "There's all hell to pay! Some mad devils are loose in the woods and cutting up rough." He halted, his chest heaving, and panted out: "Those chaps who took a shot at you, Colborne, I shouldn't wonder. There's a whole gang of 'em in there."

At once, the only thought possible under the circumstances

sprang into Colborne's mind. Sally. She had "gone off" as he'd been told, and no-one now seemed to know where she was. He couldn't, for the moment, understand just what this gang of wild men in the woods meant. All he had room for was the dread conviction that Sally had become mixed up with them.

"Have you seen Sally Picton?" he asked.

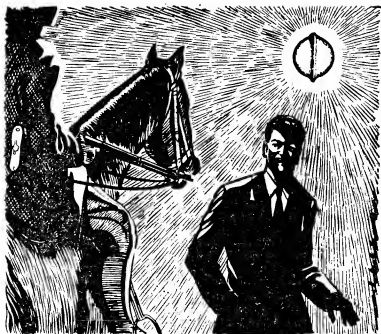
"No. Can't stop. Have to rouse out the colonel and some men. Can't tell what might happen next."

But Colborne didn't wait. He started to run down the road, heading for the lane through which the ambulance had been travelling when the .22 had shattered the windscreen.

After the noise and bustle, the quiet of the woods was restful. The trill of bird song, the lazy ripple of a stream bordering the road, the soft sigh of leaves in the breeze added up to what, at any other time, would have been a pleasurable experience. The age-old instinct of his race told Colborne that Sally was in danger. Now he had no time to weigh what this extraordinary "gang" was doing in the hush of an English woodland—all tied up with that hellish alien encyclopaedia, he supposed—he ran on, beginning to pant and feeling a stitch in his side gnawing like a rodent.

With that odd clarity of sound that startles in rolling country he heard a car start up in the village. He caught a brief glimpse, away to his left, of soldiers spreading out into a long skirmish line, and realised that the gloomy major had had things well under control, before deciding to call on Colonel Starkie personally. Gravel crunched under his feet and the road descended between grassy and tree-shaded banks. Colborne, for the first time, began to realise the idiocy of his movements. It had been the natural thing to suppose that Sally was in trouble and as a consequence of that to go to the spot where he had experienced the attack; the two ideas had, for no logical reason, become entangled in his imagination. He halted uncertainly. No near sound of any living person was to be heard; only the surreptitious life of the woodlands that pulsed strongly in these sunny days.

This sort of thing wasn't in his line of work at all. John Roland, or the soldiers, would handle this. The place for a historian in scenes of battle and action—as he mentally phrased the ambulance episode and the forthcoming roundup of the woodland gang—was in the rôle of dispassionate observer. He did not decide on tactics, he did not wield a bayonet—his task was to interpret why those particular tactics were adopted, and to count the corpses. Standing like that in the centre of the sunken road, he heard a juicy



rhythmic thudding approaching, and the clink and jangle of metal.

Long before he had time even to move, a horse and rider swung into view, the thudding changing abruptly to a staccato clatter as the horse's hooves clashed on gravel. Colborne waited. The girl switched her leg neatly over the saddle, and slid to the ground, tossing the reins over one arm. After that first furious anger that this girl was not Sally, Colborne noticed that her jodhpurs and green sweater were torn and dirty, her riding boots scratched and unpolished. She was a blonde, round-faced, pert-mouthed. In that face, where there should only have been almost simpering jollity and conscious feminine appeal, there was now only a lowering brow, a tightly pursed mouth and sunken cheeks.

Any questions he might have wished to ask were rendered superfluous by the unwavering steadiness of the .22 rifle the girl cradled, the muzzle pointing directly at his face.

With a speed he later found difficult to acknowledge, he was driven by the gun along the path, ordered brusquely down a side branch and so, after some sliding and slipping, into a hollow where men and women sat around, glowering at him. The whole scene,

the whole event, was so bizarre that Colborne was forced to suspend judgment. He knew he was not dreaming; beyond that he would not care to go.

A man dressed in ragged khaki shorts and tattered sweatshirt said: "The soldier boys are out again. We'll have to shift camp."

"Where to this time?" asked his feminine captor.

"Right across by Polder. We can fix anything there."

But Colborne was paying no more heed. The camp broke up around him and he was herded along. He could see only Sally Picton, her hands, like his own, fastened lightly behind her back, walking with downcast head between two girls in riding clothes. He could not attract her attention. He began to feel a queasy sort of fear stirring in him. Up to now strangeness had been the key-note. But now, with that queasy fear dragging at him, he saw that there was a real danger in what was happening. He decided to work his way up to Sally and then to stick around like a leech.

By the time they had reached Polder—or the woods that pressed in on one side—it was quite dark. Sally had been kept with a group of other prisoners and Colborne found himself standing before a table set up outside a small tent. A woman sat at the table, shrouded in the darkness, the small table lamp shedding all its rays upon Colborne's face. He was keenly aware of the eeriness of the situation. He was tired and hungry and his legs and ankles ached. He stood, not speaking, wondering what was happening to Sally.

"You are Walter Colborne," the woman said. Her voice was low and even-toned; Colborne did not miss the hard ring of command and ruthlessness in it. He did not reply.

"I know you are. You are the very man I have been waiting for."

Colborne could not stop himself from saying: "For me you've been waiting?"

"Yes. You were the stoker, I've been told, and you received most information." She laughed softly. "It's rather lucky for us all that I received the information I did—I'm particularly well-suited for it." She laughed again.

"What information was that?"

"I'll tell you, so that you will understand that you will have to do exactly as I say. Should the aliens have crashed on a planet where there was already a reasonably high standard of civilisation—such a planet as Earth now is, for instance—the GI contained exact instructions to enable them to take over that world without recourse

to armed aggression. By various processes. It would have been a mere matter of self-survival for them."

"I see," Colborn breathed. "But for you——"

"For me——" her voice was stripped now of all gentleness. "For me, it means the whole world for a plaything."

"You've been driven insane," Colborne said levelly.

"Not so. But I'm not arguing with you. We've only hung around here in order to snatch you. You see, you have much that I must know, in order to put the plans in my head into operation. You *must* have this knowledge. Because only a few of my associates have anything of value to me."

"My brain was numbed. I can't remember anything."

"You'll remember. When you realise that to put my plans into operation I must have what you know—you'll remember. The whole world!" Her voice trembled on that.

The stuff was there all right. In flaming letters in his mind, hanging in front of his mental eyes and searing them with alien concepts. To take-over a world! Of course, she could do it. With the alien knowledge, with what the GI must have given her, and with her own quite obvious delusions of grandeur, she could have the peoples of the world eating out of her hand. She could become the greatest dictator of all time.

Colborne, standing there in the darkness of an English wood, felt that truth with overwhelming force.

He said: "I'm sorry I can't help you."

"You will," she said. "You will. When I'm finished with you, you'll be only too happy to tell me all you know."

"Torture?"

"*Inter alia*." Her voice hardened; her darkly hunched figure stiffened. "I want to know what the alien encyclopaedia gave you, Colborne. I want to know what new knowledge you have in your mind." She lifted her hand, a white pool in the darkness. "This Sally Picton. A pawn. She will form part of the persuading process; you understand?"

Colborne did, cataclysmically. He stood, cold, numbed, sick and frightened. This was real; this was happening to him—*now!*

The woman said: "Start talking, Colborne."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The whole character of the Operations Room had changed. The new overlords had done away with the old semi-humorous,

amateur, bumbling-along attitude, and substituted modern drive and efficiency. They had two brand new, clean, unmarked maps on the walls, and the old maps had vanished. The gap between the Stag at Bay and the left hand pair of antlers looked at once forlorn and reminiscent of a dying age.

However, John Roland observed, there was nothing new on either of the maps; no information appeared thereon that had not been shown on the old maps. Sir William, his immediate superior, had been left in charge of the nuclear hazards possible in the situation. Colonel Starkie had been superseded by General Abercrombie, a large, creased-faced, pugnacious individual with the brain of a calculating machine and the nerves of a lump of pig-iron.

Only Lord Ashley, as the President of the Ancient Railways Preservation Society and one of the men intimately connected with the initial discovery, still retained his own jaunty panache and air of amateur well-being.

Superintendent Brown, and his apelike assistant, had probably been responsible for the change in the climate, Roland guessed. Of course, it had been inevitable. When such a frighteningly important discovery as this exploded on the country, then plain common-sense dictated that the Top Brains should take over and decide what was to be done. That this efficiency brought in its train a loss of humanity seemed almost equally inevitable. It was the clash between the two extremes; lofty idealism and a belief in man's inherently worthwhile nature and a consequent fuzziness around the edges of immediate action on the one hand, and clean cut action, machine-like efficiency and a crushing of the human spirit on the other.

Scientists had been poured in. Tame ones, certainly; but good sound men nevertheless. They were working like a hive of bees on the new material handed to them in the reports neatly typed out from information obtained from those individuals so far contacted who had received information from the explosion of the encyclopaedia. It was going to be a long job. One eminent expert had predicted a hundred years of continuing progress before the world would be in a position to utilise some of the information thrust upon it.

That this was so, John Roland had little doubt. He knew enough of nuclear physicists to understand the complete lack of comprehension shown by Earthly scientists confronted with this mass of alien knowledge. And there were the blanks. Items of intriguing value suddenly petered out; the rest of the essential information

lost when the encyclopaedia had blown up. Superintendent Brown, men from the Special Branch, M.I.5 and, to Roland's rue, N.I.5., were being flung into the search for every solitary scrap of knowledge broadcast. They had been told to track down every single person who might have received information and to find out if they had, and then to get it. No ifs or buts. Get it.

No matter if the person suddenly went purple in the face, clawed at his throat, and sagged, dead, and useless. That information must be obtained. And so, in the course of things, it would be obtained.

Beagle, his long yellow face creased into a worried frown, scuttled quickly through the door, automatically sliding past the paratroopers stationed there. The place swarmed with paratroopers and commandos and echoed to the martial clatter of military equipment. They all knew Beagle by now. Their job was to ensure that a repetition of the loss of Walter Colborne could not take place.

"No news at all, John," Beagle said. "The troops seem to have searched everywhere inside the perimeter. Not a sign."

"He'll be all right, Beagle." Roland spoke with more assurance than he felt. "If it's a local group that have kidnapped him, then they're bound to know the local bolt-holes. But the soldiers will find him in the long run."

Rodney Winthrop walked into the room. His screaming shirt and stolid, forthright walk and bearing were realities to hold onto in a world that seemed to be breaking up around the members of the Ancient Railways Preservation Society. Now, his jovial open face was as downcast and creased as Beagle's. He said: "We kept on badgering the chap."

"It was your job," Roland said.

"Job!" Beagle flashed. "Oh, no! It was your job to do that. You and the secret service, or whoever it is you work for. Not us. We were his friends, man! Don't you understand that?"

"Of course! But what else was there to do——?"

"The whole thing's a ruddy mess," Winthrop said grumpily. "I wish that damned coal had never seen the light of day."

Beagle screwed up his face in his judicial manner. "That's a debatable point, Winny. I know that Walter appears to be in trouble—he's vanished, at any rate—but think of the priceless stuff we're getting from the encyclopaedia."

"I am thinking," Lord Ashley's mellow voice boomed from the door. "And it's giving me ulcers."

"Oh, hullo, Lord Ashley," Roland said. "There's no more news so far, I hear."

"None. And, also, this girl Sally Picton is missing." He sat on the edge of a table and took out a packet of cigarettes and his old pipe. "The two disappearances are obviously so closely connected that I'm sure one was the cheese and the other the mouse." He tried to cram a cigarette into his pipe, saw what he was doing, grunted half-heartedly, threw away the cigarette and sucked on the cold pipe. "It's my fault, of course."

"Why yours?" someone said fretfully.

"Why? I kept on at the poor devil. Prodding and insinuating, trying to trick him, running encephalograph tests on him without telling him, all manner of cheap tricks." He sighed. "I can't blame him for going to earth. But now that it's definite this odd gang have him—and Miss Picton—I feel more of a bounder than ever."

"This gang," Roland said thoughtfully. "You know, they're an odd phenomenon, if you like."

"I don't like, John," Lord Ashley said. "But go on."

"Well—they must have some connection with the explosion. I mean, you don't just have gangs armed with guns running about the countryside. It isn't in character. You just said that Miss Picton was the cheese and Walter was the mouse. So they wanted him, as did we all, for a specific reason. That reason could only have been for what he has buried in his head."

"Hold on!" Winthrop said anxiously. "Brigadier Graham has the rest of the formula. This gang don't know that."

"They might want other information. Something we know nothing of."

"I've been thinking," announced Beagle. "He must have received a tremendous amount of information." He turned to Lord Ashley. "You remember just before the explosion, Jeffers, we had a crazy bunch of horsewomen cross the line? Well—they must have caught some of the radiating information. They must have done. So far, they have not been accounted for."

Roland sat up quickly. He said sharply: "More people who were within range? Why haven't we heard of them before?" His stare was accusing. Uncomfortably so.

"You're right, by Jove!" said Lord Ashley. To Roland he said peremptorily: "Because we only just thought of it. They must have received something, and if it was anything like the crazy stuff that American had, they might have decided to stay in the woods.

They might be trying to settle this planet, thinking they were spaceship wrecked aliens. It's very possible. Very possible indeed."

"Possible," said Beagle. "Yes. But is it likely?"

"I don't know, Beagle." Winthrop shook his head. "It could be. After all, there could have been *anything* in that confounded encyclopaedia. Think of the different subjects an Earthly encyclopaedia covers. They could be a bunch of prophets out there, wandering in the wilderness, waiting for rescue from the stars."

"And it's pretty certain that if that is so, then they want further information from Walter." Lord Ashley put down his pipe and lit a cigarette, blowing smoke out through his stained moustache. "They wanted him for a reason we don't know—a different reason from ours. But it comes to the same thing in the end. He's a walking keg of dynamite."

"I agree," Roland said, standing up and going to the door. "And they have him and we don't." He looked very grim and serious as he spoke. "I'm getting every single man the military have on this. It's bigger than we thought. These people cannot be regarded as Terrestrials any longer. They're aliens. A gang of aliens running about Britain."

Lord Ashley stood up also. He said: "A gaggle of aliens running about; I don't know. But we must find Walter." His old eyes were stern. "We must know what he knows!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the darkling woodland, with the rustle of leaves in the night breeze over his head and the firm turf beneath his feet, that overpowering sense of reality burst in Colborne. The bubble of sanity had been pricked by this shadowy woman. As soon as she had said, in her grimly relentless voice: "Start talking, Colborne," the sense of the situation had vanished.

Colborne had that familiar feeling of being detached from reality. He saw the night woodland, the dark tent, the dim shape of the woman sitting at her table, himself, standing with hands bound before her, he saw them all as though they were projected on to a screen to become mere puppets acting under no conscious direction. He stood aloof from what was going on and watched it critically, without engagement of any kind.

He had experienced this detachment before, in moments of extreme danger. Now, it swamped him with trivia, stultified his

thinking processes with irrelevances. As this wasn't happening to him—why should he worry? But, as that was indubitably himself standing before the table, it would be interesting to see just what he would do.

Colborne sat back in the wings to see what the Colborne on the stage might contrive out of this situation.

The woman rapped the table impatiently.

"Come on, Colborne. I'm waiting."

"It's no good, you know." Colborne noted with approval that Colborne spoke firmly. There was nothing of the tremble in his voice that the watching Colborne knew shivered deep down in the puppet that stood before the table. "It's no good. I just don't know anything. Perhaps it might come to me, in time."

"I've told you I don't believe that. I was near the explosion—that is——" She stopped speaking. Colborne the puppet had no time to waste if he was to convince this woman of the lie he must stick to.

He said quickly: "You saw the ambulance today. Someone shot at it. You, perhaps. Well, I was in that ambulance——"

"I know. That was why we tried to stop it by shooting the driver. We missed. And, anyway, the men in the back drove off our attack."

"Well, then. I'd been to hospital. They'd checked up on me. I don't know anything. You understand that? I don't know anything!" The watching Colborne noted with critical disapproval that the puppet Colborne's voice was rising. Incipient hysteria. He had a vague wish that he could whisper a word of advice in the puppet's ear. But, of course, he couldn't. He could only sit back and watch.

"That isn't the impression I gained." There was a new note in the woman's voice. Was it doubt? Colborne, watching, tried to analyse what it was in the woman's voice that was so familiar to him. He had heard it before. He was convinced of that. Somewhere, sometime, he had met this woman. And recently, too.

"I can't prove it," Colborne said. "But it's so."

She sighed, a tiny escape of breath that was almost lost in the rustle of the trees. "Well, we can test the truth of that easily enough. You understand that I am in a hurry. That is why I do not wish to delay this interview until the daylight. You are tired and hungry. I feel for you. But I must know——" the vibrancy in her voice carried over to Colborne. "I see the future of this world as it has never dared to be dreamed before! The whole world, subservient to my will. The will of a woman! A new world. A new

future. You cannot understand the dreams I have. I shall do away with all the shams and hypocrisies. A clean slate. With a woman in control, a woman like myself, fortified by the knowledge of those ancient aliens, there is nothing that we might not do."

Colborne dared not speak.

She went on, her voice ringing in the night air. "There is a certain reason why I know you must have the information I require. Oh, I know your brain was numbed for a time. So was mine. But now I see it all so clearly. There is a small area of sociological jiggery-pokery that I must have, a little piece of the jig-saw. With that in my possession—nothing can stop me."

The watching Colborne peered into his puppet namesake's brain. The information lay there; statistics, modes of operation, ways and means of ordering a whole high-culture civilisation to jump through the hoop without any redress. He saw that it linked up with other information he did not possess; doubtless it now reposed in the warped mind of this female type woman before him. Although, from the way she had been talking and her mode of expression, she evidently had a highly developed sense of her own masculinity, and that had overcompensated into a hatred of men and a forced bravado and show of her own womanliness. You saw that all the time—these cropped-headed women with ill-fitting slacks and never a civil word between them. He thought of Sally. Now there had been a girl who knew she was a girl—he wondered where she was now and what these people were doing with her and the other prisoners he had seen. And then the realities of the situation came back on heavy wings to roost in his brain and turn him weak.

The woman said: "No—nothing can stop me. So now, as you refuse to co-operate and as I don't believe what you tell me, I must use other means."

"Such as?"

"I'd have no hesitation in offering you whatever you wished when I have the world in the palm of my hand; if I didn't read you as the sort of man who wants his rewards first. Am I right?"

"Suppose you were?"

"I can—offer you—rewards now."

"If you're suggesting what I think you are, you must think I'm a poor blind sucker. Buy a pig in a poke?"

He could not see her face at all, only the outline of her head and shoulders as a darker silhouette in the blackness under the trees. But she shifted; her head went up and her shoulders moved. Colborne took what pleasure he could from that small pricking



victory; any little thing here might help, however insignificant it appeared.

She said: "I happen to be very beautiful. Oh, yes. The modesty that is woman. Well, that's one of the shams I shall get rid of. I know I am beautiful; men look at me. So why should I pretend otherwise. You'd find that your pig in the poke was a very fine pig, indeed." She seemed to reflect on what she was saying, for her next words were hurried, a little breathless. "And pig is not the word at all. You would be honoured with the first woman—the first person—in the world."

"For how long?"

"Ah!" Her voice sharpened. Yet, there was a touch of astonishment in it, a tremulous feeling of failure, of disappointment. Colborne was tantalised by that haunting familiarity in the voice. This woman was disappointed that he might take up her offer; she thought that he might, not knowing that he had already rejected it, and she was disillusioned on that account. Disillusioned in him?

"So you would bargain with me?" she asked in that fretful voice. "You would give me what I want in exchange for what you want?"

"I don't want it," Colborne said bluntly. "At least, not from you. And, I repeat, I don't possess the information you want."

She stood up. Standing, Colborne thought she was of a height with Sally. "Very well," she said. Her voice now carried no expression at all; it was flat and machinelike and full of the very menace that insensate machines carry in their blind obedience to the whims of mankind. "Very well. We shall try the other means I mentioned. I am now going to fetch this Picton woman—this Sally Picton you admire so much—and then we shall see whether or not you will give me the information."

Colborne's mouth went dry. Hell! Here he was, thrust into knowledge of alien science, holding in his brain the keys to miracles undreamt of by man, and all it boiled down to was a petty little affair of trying to force information from him by threats of torture. His friends wanted him to tell them the secrets of bigger and better nuclear weapons. If they blew humanity off the face of the Earth, that was not his affair, not for him to worry about. And this woman wanted his knowledge so that she could control the world, make it dance to her tune, become the greatest dictator since time began. Whichever way he turned, he was faced with a decision. What had happened had jolted him out of his comfortable rut. Now, nothing could ever be the same again.

And all this high-flown thinking could not prevent him from seeing the mental picture of Sally, being tormented because he wouldn't tell what he knew.

"Hey, Adkins!" the woman called. A form materialised beside Colborne. "You know what to do, Adkins. Keep an eye on him, and then bring him into the tent. He refuses to talk. Damnfool! We'll see if he'll talk when we knock the stuffing out of his girl. His girl! The stupid beast hasn't even the guts to talk to a girl properly, or even to make decent conversation with her! He's nothing but a shivering little introvert, playing at being a man-of-the-world. And what a mess he's made of that!" Her words carried a bitterness that surprised and troubled Colborne. What she said was true enough. He'd acted towards Sally in his usual fumbling way, uneasy where women were concerned. But why should this mad would-be dictator feel so upset about that? Perhaps she resented that sort of attitude to any woman—in view of her pronounced views on the stature of women in her envisioned future world.

"Righto, ma'am," Adkins said. Colborne laughed at the "ma'am". He had to. It made him think of short khaki skirts, flat

heeled shoes and shapeless blouses. And this was the dictator of the world!

Adkins casually cuffed him about the head. Colborne thrust up his bound hands and bent forward. The woman's voice came, sharp and hard. "Stop that, Adkins! Do what you're told, understand?"

Adkins was the man in the tattered shorts and sweatshirt Colborne had seen before. Now he stiffened, and then, reluctantly, said: "Righto."

"Righto what, Adkins?"

"Righto, ma'am."

"That's better. When I call, bring Colborne in. I shall not be here—I have work to do. Betty will deal with Picton. Your job is just to keep an eye on Colborne here. If he tries to interfere, then, and only then, may you hit him. Do you understand?"

"So Betty's to do the questioning, is she?" Adkins said. There was genuine interest in his voice.

"Yes. Colborne will be questioned by Betty. She will go on asking questions—she knows the form—until he decides to answer. Or until Picton is unconscious. Picton is a pawn. What happens to her doesn't matter."

Adkins chuckled. It was not a pleasant chuckle.

"I believe that," he said. "Too right, I believe that. Picton can roll over and die for all the help she'll get around here." And he laughed again. He seemed to find the thought alarmingly amusing.

Colborne felt sick.

And still that elusive thread of familiarity haunted him. He had known this woman called ma'am once.

She stood for a moment in the darkness. Colborne, wretched, tired, aching for sleep and peace from the buzzing in his overtaxed brain, was supremely conscious of her regard on him. He seemed to feel the burning pressure of her eyes upon his skin. Then, with an abrupt gesture, she turned and entered the tent. Colborne was alone with Adkins.

"Why don't you speak up, mate?" Adkins enquired gruffly. "She'll worm it all out of you in the long run. Got a way with her, she has. Got it from that infernal machine that blew up. Proper tells all the others what to do, she does."

"How did you get into this?"

"Me?" He sounded surprised. "I was with the girls riding that day. Look after the horses over at the riding stables." He

had a thin, pinched face and now that the connection had been pointed out, Colborne could see that indefinable something that betokens the horsy man. Had he been wearing riding clothes, the man's association would have been immediately apparent. He went on in an aggrieved voice: "Just my luck to be out with them that day. Couldn't have 'appened at a worse time. Now I'm caught up with making a brave new world for the wimmen."

"You don't approve?"

"Don't matter what I want, mate. She gives the orders, and we carry 'em out. That damned explosion really made a tartar out of her."

This conversation had the hallmark of unreality to Colborne. That he could discuss these things on the eve of seeing Sally tortured for the sake of alien science amazed him. And yet he knew that only through some release like this, in ordinary—although even that was strange enough—conversation, lay the scape valve for his own supercharged emotions. He stared towards the tent flap. What horror lay behind there, waiting for him when he entered?

"Course she wants her own way, mate. I can see her point of view, too. Easy. I didn't get much from the explosion. Oh, sure, we knew all about it at the time."

Colborne remembered the groups of girls on horseback who had ridden gaily across the line, with old Beagle shouting and waving his fist at them, just before the encyclopaedia blew up. "You've been out in the woods since then?"

"Yes. Fine nights—and we decided we couldn't go back to so-called civilisation until we'd got things straightened out. You see, we must have been all in the same area of the encyclopaedia. All about setting up a new power on any planet those poor old aliens landed on by accident. And when ma'am turned up among us, well we saw clearly enough what had to be done. Headaches or no damned headaches," he added seriously.

"So ma'am wasn't with you on the horses?"

"Oh, no. She's been out to see us and organise things. 'Ow do you think we know what's going on back in the village if we didn't have a liaison link, huh?"

Ma'am's voice spoke imperiously through the tent flap. Instinctively Colborne tensed up. "All right, Adkins. Bring him in now. Betty's here. I'm off to get on with some work."

Adkins prodded Colborne in the back. "You 'eard, mate. Get moving."

Colborne's fatigue and sick hunger hung somewhere outside

of meaning. He had passed all bounds of physical restraint. Now, all that lay ahead was the reluctant witnessing of a girl—a girl he thought he might love—being tortured. Being tormented so that he would divulge alien information that would enable a mad woman to take over the world. As Adkins had said, it had just been his luck to be out when the encyclopaedia went off. Slowly, he walked towards the tent flap.

The light from an oil pressure lamp blinded him. He shut his eyes, feeling them watering, and waited until he thought he could see again. Then he opened his eyes.

The girl who had ridden up on her horse and arrested him at the point of a .22 rifle stood straddle legged before him. Her green jumper had been removed, and she wore a light sun-top of coloured material, with a Paisley silk scarf knotted around her throat. Her jodhpurs and leggings were still on, and they made a perfect accompaniment to the riding whip she drew slowly through her fingers. The quirt made a sly rustling sound in the silence.

That disgusting sound was interrupted by a low moaning. Every nerve in Colborne's body quivered.

Betty, flicking her whip negligently, moved aside.

He was staring straight at horror.

Her wrists strapped to the central tent-pole and her body partially unclothed, Sally hung, half-fainting in her bonds. Across her white back lay the long, straight, bright-red weals of a whip. Their red exactly matched the red of her lips. Her light summer dress had been brutally ripped down; it hung in tatters around her waist. Mud clotted the hem. She wore no shoes, and her bare feet were mud and blood-stained.

And all the time she made a low, crooning, bubbling moaning.

Betty said, casually: "Now then, Colborne. Ma'am wants you to answer a few simple questions. The first is: 'Will you tell her what she wants to know?' Or do we have to go on beating this Picton person until you do?"

Colborne tried to move his tongue. He desperately wanted to lick his lips. His legs felt fluttery; he was sure he was going to fall down at any moment. Sally. Sally. He stared at her, gripped by a revulsion that turned his insides to water and pap. Civilised people just didn't do this kind of thing. Lord Ashley and Beagle and Winthrop had wanted the information they knew he possessed and he had refused to give it to them. They had been firm; but polite. They knew what they wanted of him; but they had used civilised methods to obtain it. He had refused

—although it had not been easy, he had thought that it was his duty to humanity to refuse. Now he was faced with the same challenge on an entirely different emotional level. These people wanted what he knew; and they weren't choosy about how they obtained it. And Sally was in the middle; Sally was having her fair skin cut to ribbons, with the red blood flowing.

Colborne straightened. The trembles died out of his legs. He looked contemptuously at Betty and round at Adkins. He braced himself against the ground, pushing down with his muscles until they ached, until they told him he was still in contact with Mother Earth.

"Go on," he said. "Carry on. Beat Miss Picton all you like. Tear her skin to ribbons. Go on. But I won't talk, understand? I won't talk! Go on! Flay her alive!" He was panting with anger now. "I won't talk!"

KENNETH BULMER

(*To be continued.*)

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Riddle of the Dinosaurs

For one hundred thousand years the dinosaurs were the lords of creation—and then they disappeared, almost without trace. In this article one of our regular scientific contributors discusses some of the latest theories concerning the eclipse of the giant reptiles

Seventy-five million or so years ago dinosaurs reached the peak of their evolution—then they died. Only their bones, a few footprints and a handful of dried and desiccated eggs were left to tell of a hundred million years of absolute dominance over all the Earth.

Why did this so-successful order of reptiles, master of fang and claw and armour, succumb and vanish and leave the world wide-open for conquest by the mammals?

Like a piece of forensic detection, the clues to the mystery have not come to light in the order of the events to which they refer. To peer backwards into the misty depths of Time, to watch once again those vast expanses of swamplands where giant creatures prowled restlessly for food, battled gigantically, clashed armour and fang, to see again that long hot summer that drowed through a hundred million years, to feel the heat and the humidity and the stench, to do all these things entails for us a leap of the imagination. We must scrutinise a piece of fossilised bone, weigh the evidence of spores trapped for all time in petrified mud, measure footprints, study closely the familiar reptiles in the world about us, try to feel our way backwards into an antiquity so remote that not even the first mammal had seen the sun, when man was a mere conjecture on the horizon.

And had the reptiles not vanished, then in all probability mankind would never have walked confidently over that skyline into history. The Age of the Reptiles continued for a hundred million years; there have been but seventy million since the last great cold-blooded king lived, and humanity has scratched about for perhaps a few thousand years before he learned to write, and history was born.

But—can we say that had not those shambling almost-men

lumbered on to the world's stage with their crude clubs and their awed mastery of fire the dinosaurs would still exist? New ideas have recently been broached and many of the old theories for the death of the dinosaurs no longer seem so reasonable as they once did.

For us, then, the story begins with footprints in time; fossil footprints of the very early dinosaurs, whose bones we have so far never found, in the Lower Triassic deposits. By the middle Triassic evolution had already fixed these reptiles' main forms—they walked upright on two legs and had little use for their tiny hands. They were carnivores but, already, some types were tending to become vegetarians, and quadrupeds.

Dinosaurs are generally taken to be reptiles of the order of Saurischia and Ornithiscia and it is the Saurischia type that fills the popular imagination with sinuous necks, tiny heads and monstrous bodies or with gigantic heads and vicious claws and insatiable appetites. Two of these were giants in their own right—although some mature dinosaurs, such as *Compsognathus*, grew no larger than a foot in length. *Struthiomimus* was such a giant. He was twelve feet long and could run as fleetly as a racehorse. He had to. He was a herbivore and fair game for his predatory brothers. He used his forelimbs to grasp branches so that he could feed on leaves with his horny ostrich-like beak.

Best known of these dinosaurs is the carnivore *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. A thirty-eight feet long carrion eater, his monstrous teeth, each a foot in length, allied to a heavy four foot long skull, made him a bestial destroyer. Probably *Tyrannosaurus* could not run and it is likely that he carried his head fairly low, unlike the many pictures showing him sitting or standing up with head poised ready to strike with jaws agape. He was the largest land carnivore ever; but *Allosaurus*, earlier in time and smaller, a mere thirty feet in length, and looking less bulky and far more vicious, was probably the supreme killer among the dinosaurs. But they all died.

Another group of the Saurischia was the Sauropoda, which included the giants *Brachiosaurus* and *Diplodocus*, all of 65 feet long, as well as the slightly underweight *Brontosaurus*. They lived on water plants in shallow estuaries and by reason of their bone construction seem to have used the water to support their tons of flesh. In spite of their enormous size, their brains were no larger than a modern puppy's.

One not so well known group of dinosaurs was the Ornithiscia, water loving herbivores looking like reptilian kangaroos. Of these, *Iguanodon* was twenty-eight feet long with a horny-scaled skin.

Earlier than these there lived the armoured dinosaurs, *Stegosaurus* with his dustbin-lid sized bony plates projecting as a frill along his back and *Triceratops* with his three horns and giant bony frill extending over his head. But they all died, too.

These were some of the fantastic creatures that lorded it over creation for a hundred million years. They laid eggs. Clutches of the eggs of *Protoceratops* were discovered in the sand of Mongolia by an expedition of the American Museum of Natural History. Each egg was five inches long and two inches in diameter.

Because it took a second for a nerve message to travel from the tip of a dinosaur's tail to his brain and back again, many of the largest dinosaurs developed secondary and tertiary brains, groups of nerves along the spine.

But, in spite of all this, they still died out.

Palaeontologists searched the Earth and their minds to find reasons for the decease of the dinosaurs. Many theories were woven, yet few were generally acceptable.

Could it be that the fleet, tiny mammals, who in developing from a branch of the small therapsid reptiles had chanced on the device of warm bloodedness, by stealing dinosaur eggs for food and still being agile enough to escape had slaughtered entire new generations?

Perhaps the herbivorous dinosaurs could not adapt to the new grasses then making their appearance, because of the silica content, and when they died, there was little sustenance for the giant carnivores?

It may be that the species of old races become fixed in their specialised forms and lose their ability to adapt to changing conditions.

The death of the dinosaurs coincided with an upheaval of Earth's continents, so perhaps a thick cloud layer cleared allowing harsh ultraviolet light from the Sun to reach the surface and sear and sterilise the dinosaur's bodies. At the same time the Earth chilled; not enough to cause an ice-age, but perhaps enough to lower the temperature ten degrees centigrade and destroy many plants—and thus the plant eaters—and thus, once again, the eaters of the plant eaters.

None of these ideas is new; but recently two refreshingly new theories have been put forward, one in the U.S.A. and the other in the U.S.S.R., to explain the death of the dinosaurs.

American biologist Dr. Schatz suggests that modern plant forms were the indirect cause of the planet-wide dinosaur's decease. In spite of the enormous size of most dinosaurs, they were reptiles with

slow metabolism, so that they did not require very large amounts of food. Schatz takes the view that the Earth's atmosphere throughout most of the period of the dinosaurs' domination contained far less oxygen than it does now.

As grass spread across the planet and the new broad-leaved plants replaced the needle-leaved trees, the new-type vegetation produced enough oxygen to alter the concentration in the air. The modern world was being born as we know it now, with the natural alterations that must have taken place in seventy million years, gymnosperms were giving way to angiosperms, the whole world was changing around the ponderous dinosaurs.

The effect on them was fatal. With more oxygen in the air and more oxygen available to them than ever before, their metabolism was speeded up and they needed more food to keep alive. They needed more food than their giant bodies could find.

Towards the end for the dinosaurs there must have been planet-wide oxygen exhilaration. They burned themselves out, always hungry; they starved to death because they could not eat enough to stay alive.

Two Soviet astronomers have a completely different story. They blame everything on cosmic rays. Much evil and some good has been blamed on cosmic rays, and this new theory is well in keeping with the trend of modern thought.

By an astronomical calculation, the Russians derive from the fact that there have been five supernovae within man's history, that there should be a supernova within twenty-six light years of Earth every two hundred million years.

In addition to the light and radio waves of the multi-million sunpower outburst, it is thought that fantastically powerful cosmic rays should pour from the novaed star, filling all surrounding space with their mutating energy.

The result would be a large increase in the number of secondary cosmic rays reaching the Earth's surface, enough to multiply the mutation rate many fold for hundreds or thousands of years.

The result of a flood of cosmic rays would be disastrous for large, long-lived animals with a small reproduction rate. The dinosaurs were the perfect, if unwitting target. Their accumulation of radiation damage before breeding would be far in excess of that of small, short-lived creatures such as their contemporary mammals. Most mutations are injurious and only by fast breeding can the most lethal be eliminated and the few useful ones incorporated into the genetic pool of a particular species.

The intriguing point of the cosmic ray theory is that it also holds out some hope of explaining the fantastic jumps in evolution made in a relatively few generations by a large number of species simultaneously.

Going on from these two latest theories, there seems no reason why they should not be compatible. If cosmic rays did indeed shower down in unprecedented numbers then the alterations that went on in other living tissue beside that comprising the dinosaurs cannot be overlooked. The very changes in vegetation mentioned in the first theory could be traced back to the same cause. The scales were heavily loaded against the dinosaurs; even they themselves were their own worst enemies. They had a catastrophically small range of temperature tolerance; only within a narrow band of twenty degrees Fahrenheit are they active. If the temperature falls they become sluggish and unable to fight or look after themselves; when it rises they not only become sluggish; they also become infertile.

And, possibly, the clinching argument to account for their demise may be found in the tiny, contemptible, squashed-underfoot mammals. It may very well be that the same radiation that destroyed the dinosaurs was also the spur that jumped the mammals on the long climb to intelligence—and to *Homo sapiens*.

But the situation is now altered.

We are the long-lived species afraid of the mutant death.

We are the animals—the Lords of the Earth—who will suffer most from an increase of the Earth's background radioactivity, whether it be of cosmic rays, strontium-90, cobalt-60 or carbon-14.

We call ourselves *Homo sapiens*. Maybe the next Lords of Creation—assuming that there are any—will not be so kind. We look back on the huge, rambling, sluggish, almost brainless dinosaurs with a sort of contemptuous pity. Oh, yes, they ruled the Earth for a hundred million years and we've only been around for half a minute or so; but they were a pretty dim sort of brute. I mean, after all that, they died out and for all they accomplished might never have bothered to live at all.

But, at least, it wasn't through any act of their own that they died. They didn't raise the radioactivity level of the Earth. It wasn't their own fault.

But *we*—calling ourselves *Homo sapiens* and with all to lose—are the ones who are generating the radiation hazard that could destroy us as effectively and with as much horror as must have been witnessed in the last days of the dinosaurs.

JOHN NEWMAN



New Hard-Cover Science Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

Laboriously, I have ploughed my way through the latest addition to the juvenile library written by Captain W. E. Johns. It is unfortunate that this particular item should be the one which has reached me for review, for by and large I admire Captain Johns' stories for the younger reader. *THE EDGE OF BEYOND* (Hodder & Stoughton, 8/6, 192 pp., illustrated by Stead) is not worthy of his reputation, it is a mess of trivia and incident without apparent plot and little suspense. Action there is, yes. The action of the characters moving from one pointless stage setting to the next, culminating in a Gernsbackesque travelogue through an ideal world, and a very minor battle in which an enemy spaceship is put out of action with a machine-gun.

To put it mildly, I was disappointed, especially as the scene-setting foreword is very promising. In this Captain Johns shows a grasp of the concepts of space-flight and stellar distances, so often lacking in British authors (and not only among those who write for the juvenile market). Unfortunately, this is not followed up in the story.

For example, whilst the concern of the people of Mino, one-

time inhabitants of Mars, now dwelling on an asteroid and in process of reconstructing Mars, for Earth's nuclear playthings is understandable, their equally great worry over Earth's orbital satellites proving a danger to Martian interplanetary traffic (mainly between the asteroids and Mars) is not supportable. Again, early in the book a form of mental conditioning (which Professor Brane dismisses as some sort of hypnotism, apparently unaware that "conditioning" ranging all the way from simple advertising methods to the "trials" of the Soviet countries is an acknowledged factor of our modern social systems) stated to be practised by the people of a planet called Lox is discussed with horror by the Terran and Minoan characters; whilst at the end of the book, on Terrormagna, such artificial conditioning becomes acceptable. Again, in several places, the principal object of several solar systems appears to be a planet—visually as well as in other ways—with little or no attention being given to the suns around which these planets presumably revolve. Yet again, when the Minoans take the Terrans on a trip across the farther reaches of

space, to protect themselves from assorted unknown cosmic radiations (rays) the Minoans cover themselves with a heavy yellow varnish before departure. It is not clear how long the trip takes, but it cannot be less than several days and from indirect reference one may assume it to last several months or at least weeks. As no mention is made of this coating being renewed at any time, one supposes the Minoans do not wash. Whilst this might appeal to some youngsters I rather think a number will recognise that life in any space-vessel would become unbearable after a time, if this were so.

However, I'm poking adult sized holes in a juvenile-sized yarn, which is not strictly fair play. But I do wish that adult authors would realise that a fair proportion of the younger generation are quite well fitted to consider these points. I know quite a few youngsters who can write a good summary of the possibilities of space flight, the snags which we can face, and the possible snags we haven't really considered yet. A better summary than I could manage, at that, for I spend my time keeping up with the fiction in the field while they give attention to more factual matters!

For the rest, the Minoans make contact with the Professor because they need the spaceship which has been holding a watch over him for other purposes. Despite this, they promptly let him have the use of the ship and crew for a joy ride, which as I said before consists of little but incident. On an asteroid visited in an early book, they find the world burned out but reviving,

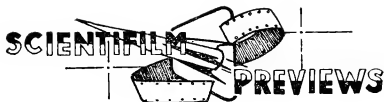
run into some difficult conditions because of mirages, and run off to elsewhere. Approaching another planet (presumably in another solar system) they encounter radiation which sends the Terrans into a sort of gestalt-mind condition; the Minoans, better protected, turn the ship around and get away. A small hole gets knocked into the vessel by what is thought to be a meteorite but which turns out to be an artifact (this is not followed up) and they land on another planet to effect a repair, and after a purely cursory examination move on again. And so on . . . none of these incidents is really developed, and never does the suspense get above what I can only describe as a "casual" level.

To compare this book with a Heinlein juvenile, or even one of the Winston series republished over here by Hutchinson, would be ridiculous.

I've devoted rather a lot of space to this because I would honestly like to see some good juvenile s-f published in this country. There are a large number of youngsters "reading" science-fiction comics—and there is very little to attract them to a higher standard of reading matter—I fear that to try to convert a "Rick Random" enthusiast with such a pedestrian work as this would be an impossible task.

There is nothing around for the novel reader (adult) that has come to my notice, but for the short story enthusiast there is a very fine collection of Jack Finney's stories, *THE CLOCK OF TIME* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 13/6) in which he develops twelve different twists on "time".

SCIENTIFILM PREVIEW



News and Advance Film Reviews Direct from Hollywood's

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

THE BARSOOMIAN BLOBLETS, latest little "gem" from producer Allan D. Williams, adds no lustre to the crown of the "King of the Scientifilms". An irrational spool of celluloid, more irritating (if possible) than **THE MAN FROM THE WHITE POOL**, **THE MULE PEOPLE** and **THE MIDGET MANTIS**. When will Williams give us another of at least the calibre of **THE BACKWARD ALUTNARAT**, and preferably of the stature of Ramon Eff-smith's **THIS PENINSULA PLUTO**?

Earth intelligences, observing that Mars, the planet of war, is about to abandon polar power thrusts for a thermal Armageddon, decide to intervene in the best interests of the Barsoomians before their cold war gets too hot. Mars has become a hot canal of intercanalian rivalry, suspicion, distrust, etc., all brought about by the adult blobs who misrule the Red Planet. Unfortunately, all Martians are not as red as the cool red hills of Mars, but some blobs are blue and some are yellow and some are green and some even have polka dot freckles.

This makes it difficult for one blob to accept or integrate with another.

Only the children of Mars, the preteens of Barsoom, have unsullied circulatory systems and so it is to **THE BARSOOMIAN BLOBLETS** that the expeditionaries from Earth must address themselves in order to expedite matters among the adults.

As the picture opens, Bob Blob, his wife Bobbina and their son Blobbin are getting established in a rocket launching nuclear research centre where Mr. Blob will work on a hydrogenheaded missile for potential warfare with the enemy. Blobbin gets acquainted with the other kids in the camp, who are less interested in their parents' destructive jobs than in a queer creature about the size of a *canaloupe* which has arrived from space on an aurora of light and is holed up in a nearby cave from which it sends out telepathic commands comprehensible only to the Bloblets. The elders are too busy with matters eldritch to be reached by the peace-intentioned humans from Earth.

The humans—one for each belligerent Blob nation: Rusta, Vadca, Jurmi, Inqland, Zapan—are curious creatures, quite unlike the brain-like Blobs, consisting of a head with hair, two eyes, ears, a nose and a mouth, all this set atop a body with two arms and two legs. Quite complicated monsters, these earthmen, but well-meaning.

Well, so here is the benevolent earthman, hiding out on the outskirts of the North Amartian satellite centre, doing what his compatriots are doing in other nations on the planet: marshalling the children to offset the martial efforts of the adults. Whether it's something about the Martian atmosphere or something else that wasn't clear to me, but the humans, while they're at it, keep growing till they're about as big as elephants.

Of course, as you clever ones in the crowd may have suspected ere now, there is no picture called *THE BARSOOMIAN BLOBLETS*, but, retold thru Martian eyes, that's about the size of how William Alland's *THE SPACE CHILDREN* would look, translated from terrestrial terms. I chose this method of reviewing it to point up how senseless the plot is.

Michael Ray, the child star of *THE SPACE CHILDREN*, has the sensitive fannish face of an adolescent Odd John, and ought to be used in Wilmar Shiras' "Children of the Atom". He is wasted, as is everybody else, in this little-child-shall-lead-them tract.

This criticism, if it ever comes to his attention, will probably hurt Bill Alland's feelings, and I'm sorry, because he's not a *bad*

guy. I have had lunch with him at the Studio, chatted in his office, dined out with him, socialised with him in my home. I understand what he was aiming at in *THE SPACE CHILDREN*, and perhaps less sophisticated, non sci-fi audiences will view the picture thru rose-coloured glasses rather than my monocular sieve. I know, however, I am not alone, for I saw a special pre-showing of *THE SPACE CHILDREN* at the 6th Sou-westercon in Dallas, Texas, USA, and in the discussion that followed after the lights went up the attendees of the s-f conference practically *dared* me to write something good about the picture. They had been right there, and suffered thru the picture with me, and their amalgamated opinion was, "bombs down"!

THE ATTACK OF THE 50-FOOT WOMAN has one short sequence that's good, imaginatively photographed inside a globeship from space as a couple of human beings investigate the mysteries of its interior, but otherwise it's an inferior product, with a painfully evident papier-mâché mockup of the giantess' hand.

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WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

In the latest issue of the fan magazine PLOY, H. P. (Sandy) Sanderson mentions an experience that a lot of us must be having for the first time these days:

"At the office each new science-fiction-type news release leads to a barrage of questions from the mundane types who tend to regard one with awe as an expert on these things because of prior knowledge."

True, true. But one of the snags of being bowed down to as an idol is that your feet of clay tend to loom uncomfortably large in your worshippers' field of vision. There is a danger that in time people might find out that we don't know *everything*, especially since few of us have had practice in the technique of being an Informed Source. Sandy goes on to offer a helpful hint for avoiding this catastrophe:

"What these mundane types don't know is that a system of dealing with these questions has been developed whereby the ones that can be answered by a hasty mental reference to one of the Arthur C. Clarke books are answered in detail, and the ones that can't are

answered in such a way as to show that of course the speaker knows the full answer but isn't allowed to reveal it because the information is still classified."

Well, you can see at once that there opens out before us a glorious new field for the exercise of the techniques of "OneUpmanship", as pioneered by Stephen Potter, one which we have entirely to ourselves and which is full of possibilities. For instance, American fans are in the happy position of being able to use this Top Secret Defensive Gambit as the basis for an offensive sortie. When faced with a question casting doubt on the usefulness of the space flight programme, especially from somebody who has in the past been particularly nasty and sneering about our ideas, it is sufficient to whip out a little black notebook and ask "What Communist Front organisations have *you* been a member of?"

Obviously there is a lot of research to be done and any suggestions you have would be welcome, addressed to me in care of this magazine. For instance, there are a lot of questions which can't be countered by Sandy's defensive gambit and which are awk-

ward for those of us, few in number admittedly, who don't have all the works of Arthur Clarke off by heart. Like "How do you know how far away the stars are?" and similarly deceptively simple queries. If you haven't got the self-confidence to launch into a glib lecture about spectra, Doppler effects, locomotive whistles and red shifts—and we must admit that the whole thing sounds lots less convincing than a tape measure—all I can suggest is the Condescension Counter. This involves whipping out several sheets of blank paper, a sharp pencil (and if possible a slide rule), meanwhile asking confidently, "Of course, you understand the differential calculus?" There is something about these last two words which strikes terror into the heart of the average moron—I can hardly bring myself to type them—and fills him with a crushing sense of inferiority. On hearing, with a politely incredulous air, the reply "Well . . . I'm afraid not", you look pitying, then puzzled and just stand there with the air of one looking helplessly around for a child's abacus until the questioner apologises and retreats in disorder. Of course if he *does* happen to understand the differential calculus I admit you're in a bit of a spot. All I can suggest is that you raise the ante by mentioning all the mathematical esoterica you've ever heard of in the hope that eventually you will reach the stage where you can safely say, "Well, it should be pretty obvious then?" Of course, you might be up against an experienced counter-bluffer

(Continued overpage.)

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1958 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below, or on a postcard if preferred and mail it immediately to NEBULA, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

Fourth Factor	
Agent Provocateur	
Friction	
Take Your Partners	
Threshold	
Wisdom of the Gods-Pt.3	

Name and address:

Mr. Alex Green of Carmyle, Glasgow, wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 31. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was as follows.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------|
| 1. WAR AGAINST DARKNESS | |
| By William F. Temple | 26.5% |
| 2. THE FIRES DIE DOWN | |
| By Robert Silverberg | 25.2% |
| 3. THE BEATIFIC SMILE | |
| By E. C. Tubb | 16.1% |
| 3. WISH UPON A STAR | |
| By Peter J. Ridley | 16.1% |
| 3. NINTAN'S EXPERIENCES | |
| By Brian W. Aldiss | 16.1% |

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will appear in Nebula No. 37.

News and Gossip

The Transatlantic Fan Fund election has been won by Ron Bennett, editor of PLOY, and on all counts a very fine choice. By the time you read this he will be in America attending the World Convention in Los Angeles. Meanwhile out there another dream is coming true in an almost fairy-like fashion. This 1958 Convention is the result of a propaganda campaign which started ten years ago almost as a joke with the slogan "South Gate in '58." South Gate is a small town just outside Los Angeles. Editors of fanzines used the slogan as a filler until it became a tradition in the fan world and in 1957 the convention was voted to the South Gate fans without any opposing contenders, the first time this has ever happened and probably the last. Unfortunately South Gate does not actually have any big hotels so the Convention had to be arranged for Los Angeles itself, and it looked as if the legend would fail to come true by

a matter of a few niggling miles. But we reckoned without the ingenuity of the South Gate fans. They have arranged with the Mayors of Los Angeles and South Gate for the territory of the Convention Hotel to be legally ceded by Los Angeles to South Gate for the duration of the Convention, and the Mayor of South Gate will attend at the opening to claim the territory formally for his municipality.

Sadder news comes from the West Coast with reports of the deaths of two very well-known fans, Francis Towner Laney and Vernon McCain. F. T. Laney was in many ways a controversial character with many enemies he had made himself with his sardonic sense of humour and vitriolic style, but Vernon McCain was universally popular. Both of them contributed to the interest of the fan world for hundreds of us all over the world, though neither had been active recently, and it certainly will not seem quite the same without them.

BACK NUMBERS . . .

In response to requests from a large number of readers we are again offering back numbers of NEBULA for those who are unable to obtain them from their usual supplier.

All issues from No. 11 to No. 32 can be had for 2/- or 35c. each post free. All other numbers are permanently sold out.

Cash with order, please, to: NEBULA Science-Fiction, 159 Crownpoint Road, Glasgow, S.E.

the background haze of light. It looks for all of space like a proud stallion lifting his head to gaze on the stars.

We know that such nebulosities are not giant tunnels devoid of all stars drilling through the Universe; nor are they warps in space absorbing all matter and energy.

They are clouds of dust millions of miles across; clouds of matter thinner than our finest Terrestrial vacuums but of such enormous extent that they absorb all light waves attempting to penetrate them. They are the intermediate stage between novæ and planets.

But the most interesting feature of the Horsehead Nebula is not its shape but its edge of light; a *cheveux-de-frise* of radiance betraying the almost unbelievable maelstrom of the collision between the Horsehead cloud with interstellar clouds of gas.

In the cosmic frame of reference, when the irresistible meets the immovable they intermesh, flare with energy and pass through each other. Only in the last few years has the importance of this type of interaction been brought home to human scientists—literally brought home from deep space to the laboratory. For it is now realised that a fourth state of matter—not a true solid, liquid or gas—can exist. In these colliding clouds shock waves are formed. With fronts 100,000 miles and more wide, they race through the thin gas exciting it to luminescence and raising its temperature to tens of thousands of degrees centigrade.

At such temperatures the gas atoms no longer exist as such; they are split to form a plasma, a mixture of electrons and positively charged nuclei. In the Universe plasma exists in clouds of gas excited by hot stars buried in them, in colliding interstellar clouds and galaxies and in stars where it is this state which fuels the thermonuclear processes.

On Earth we create plasma in A and H bomb explosions. Also, less exuberantly, in neon tubes and electric arcs. These are faint replicas of the cosmic forces surrounding us, but they are enough for scientists to realise that in them lies the beginning and ending of all matter and energy. For a wisp of plasma behaves like a wire in a magnetic field; move it and electricity flows, pass electricity through it and it moves.

The outgrowth of magnetohydrodynamics is now being used to throw light on diverse subjects such as the creation of galaxies, the stability of the spiral arms of galaxies, the spin of the Sun and the birth of the planets—and even to suggest that the fundamental particles of the atom are self-organising electro-magnetic fields and gravitational forces akin to wisps of plasma.

Temperatures of four million degrees centigrade plus exist in the plasma generated in laboratory vacuum tubes and this deuterium plasma creates bursts of neutrons now believed to come from hydrogen fusion processes which will eventually be harnessed to produce H-power galore—probably the only power we can harness at the moment that is capable of driving manned ships out beyond the Moon, the only nuclear power that will be as never-ending as the seas of the Earth, the only power that can be used to produce food and shelter for the ever-increasing multitudes of Earth, the only nuclear power that does not subtly poison its users, the only power that can successfully open up a way of escape for Mankind from his beginnings—the way to the stars.

From study of a photograph of a dark nebulosity shaped like the head of a horse, to the harnessing of powers rated in the billions of horsepower and their use in the conquest of the stars is a giant stride, but one whose realisation is implicit in the questing mind of Man.



Another scan
by
cape1736

